

Rebuilding and Guiding the Self With Spirituality: A Grounded Theory of Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults With Cancer

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PURPOSE: To clarify the experiences of spirituality among adolescents and young adults (AYAs) with cancer following diagnosis.

PARTICIPANTS & SETTING: Participants were recruited at a clinic and on an oncology unit in Turkey. A combination of purposive sampling and theoretical sampling strategy was used to identify 14 participants.

METHODOLOGIC APPROACH: A grounded theory design was used for this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with each participant between October 2021 and January 2022. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding.

FINDINGS: All the participants were Muslim, were aged 15–39 years, spoke Turkish, and had undergone treatment for any type of cancer. The core category was identified as rebuilding and guiding the self with spirituality. AYAs connected more closely with their sense of spirituality after being diagnosed with cancer.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING: This study demonstrated the importance of providing a supportive healing environment to address the spiritual dimension of the cancer experience for AYAs. Individualized interventions ensuring an appropriate level of spiritual care based on clinical standards are essential to meet the needs of patients and ensure positive long-term health outcomes.

KEYWORDS adolescent and young adult; cancer; grounded theory; nursing; spirituality

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Cancer and the complex treatments that accompany it have a significant impact on the mental, existential, and spiritual functioning of adolescents and young adults (AYAs), including on their ability to find meaning in life (McNeil, 2016; Robert et al., 2019). Worldwide, more than one million new oncologic diagnoses occur in AYAs annually (Alvarez et al., 2022). Adolescence and young adulthood are typically associated with a long life expectancy (Emerson et al., 2022). Therefore, when AYAs face a potentially terminal disease, such as cancer, they may find it extremely difficult to cope with the fear that it may progress and potentially bring them closer to death (Alvarenga et al., 2021). When individuals are faced with life-threatening diagnoses, religious beliefs and spiritual values may become more meaningful for them. Individuals with cancer may turn to spirituality because of uncertainties concerning their prognosis, decisions about long-term and symptomatic treatment, and evaluations of the treatment process (Kelly et al., 2022). After being diagnosed, AYAs often view spiritual beliefs and values as a source of adaptation, coping, and hope regarding the physical, psychological, and mental effects of the disease (Alvarenga et al., 2021; McNeil, 2016).

Religion and spirituality are similar in theory but different in practice. Religion is an organized, community-based belief system, and spirituality is related to what an individual believes personally. Religion consists of behavior-oriented, outward-directed practices, and spirituality is emotionally oriented and inward directed. Religion includes spirituality, but having spirituality does not necessarily mean having a religion (Litalien et al., 2022; Weathers et al., 2020). Islam is a monotheistic religion that requires submission to God (Lunde, 2002).