

## **Spiritual Identity of Masticated Breast Cancer Survivor- A Case Report**

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### *Abstract*

The identity of an individual is made up of goals, values, and beliefs to which a person is committed. It is considered as a coherent conception of the self, a distinguishing character or an individual's personality. Spirituality/religiosity is one that describes an individual's identity. It is an existential desire of an individual to orient life into ultimate questions of value or meaning. The present study explores the spiritual identity of a masticated breast cancer survivor using a case study approach. The in-depth interview was conducted among 35-year-old Indian Christian women who have undergone unilateral mastectomy and is a survivor. She has used spirituality as a medium in the recovery process. The case describes the fluctuations of spiritual identity over the period of recovery. The spiritual identity is seen as trusting in higher power and prayer as a medium for solace. However, after the treatment process, the participant reported herself to have enhanced faith and transcendence. In summary, spiritual and religious beliefs stayed as one of the significant ways of dealing with the cancer experience of the participant.

*Keywords:* Spiritual Identity, Mastectomy, Breast cancer, Case Report.

### **Introduction**

Identity is made up of goals, values, and beliefs to which a person is solidly committed and is a coherent conception of the self. Hence it is described as the distinguishing character or an individual's personality (Hauge, 2007). It is composed of many pieces which include vocational/

career identity, political identity, religious identity, relationship identity, intellectual identity, sexual identity, ethnic identity, interests, personality and physical identity (Santrock, 2009). Spiritual Identity includes the existential desire of an individual to orient life into the ultimate questions of value or meaning (Fardella, 2005).

The present study explores the spiritual identity of a masticated breast cancer survivor using a case study approach. The in-depth interview was conducted among 35-year-old Indian Christian women who have undergone unilateral mastectomy and is a survivor. The following paragraphs describe the case.

### **Case Formulation**

#### **Patient history**

A 35-year-old Indian Christian woman was presented to the hospital with indications of lump and redness in the breast. The blood sample was analyzed for the hormonal checkup and was found to be normal. Her apprehensions made her consult a gynecologist for the second time and was referred to a surgeon. The surgeon requested a surgical removal of the lump as the patient was not experiencing pain, irritation or any leakage of fluid through the nipple. The follow-up consultation was done after two and a half months. After the screening, the doctor requested an immediate surgical removal of the lump as it has grown tremendously during the lapse period. During the surgery, the Hemoglobin level has suddenly dropped and the sample was send to the laboratory for biopsy. The test revealed cancerous growth in her breast.

#### **Treatment**

As a part of the treatment procedure, she had undergone six chemotherapy and eighteen radiations for recovery. It was during the time of treatment that she had a higher religious orientation which helped her to be fearless and courageous. During the time of radiation therapy, she took admission in a shelter home, which was near to the hospital. She depicts the radiation therapy period to be very distressing when the whole of the hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows are lost. The hair loss was hidden using a wig but she experienced physical discomfort. She did not experience any nauseated feeling and was able to have food during the time of chemotherapy. Husband was her constant support when she was bedridden. But once her hair started to loose completely after the second chemotherapy she felt miserable. She experienced

feelings of tiredness and fatigue immediately after the chemotherapy which was reduced subsequently.

During this time of treatment phase, she used to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion. Her prayer '*Lord as you dissolve into my body as bread, let my suffering vanish away, this I ask in your name Lord*' have relieved her stress and tiredness. Her faith was closely related to religious practices of attending Holy Mass, receiving Holy Communion and attending prayer services. She reappraised the situation saying that she stood up with faith and God has helped her in distress. She believed that God has also granted the grace for her to detect it quickly so that immediate treatment was provided leading to recovery. She reported about receiving constant support through prayer from her neighbors and beloved ones. This made her stronger to get back to her normal routine life quickly. Once she heard people supporting her through prayer she reflected upon her styles of praying and realized that she used to pray only for her immediate family members and not for others. She also realized how important it is to pray for the people around which was not done before. This insight led her to pray for unknown others out in the world. Hence, during the three hours of chemotherapy she used to recite the rosary and pray for all cancer patients undergoing similar treatment procedure (ie: for all cancer patients, patients doing chemotherapy, the individuals who are in the initial stage of diagnosis and are upset about it, those who don't have money, individuals who are not having a bystander to accompany them etc.).

Even during the treatment phase, she used to attend the social gatherings and people often comment on her courage. This comment was taken positively by her. She even went ahead communicating to other cancer patient propagating her recovery over the illness. This boosted up confidence and courage among the patients who were still undergoing treatment. She was curious about sharing the experiences and symptoms with others who visited her. She aimed at making people aware of the symptoms so that they can be vigilant. The visitors generally had apprehension about visiting a patient but she welcomed people in a jovial manner and that was surprising for them.

Being with a group of patients with similar issues she understood that her suffering was minimal and curable when compared to others especially with regard to early diagnosis, place of growth, family, financial and health practitioner's support. As a mother, she was apprehensive about her children and as women, she was disturbed seeing her surgical

scar. She never complained about her illness but she entrusted all the suffering to God.

### **Outcome**

As a survivor after recovery, she propagated imparting more support groups so that it can render a positive impact in the patients. Her major learning after cancer journey was to pray for other cancer survivors and for everyone. She says that if you have faith you have the courage to meet the harsh realities of life. She realized that she should be strong in prayer as it has given solace for her. Cancer experience has enhanced her faith in God. Her relation with multiple cancer survivors revealed that lack of awareness about subsidiary programmes is prevalent in rural India. If this information is spread among patients with a poor background, that will render good financial aid for them. She promoted initiating free screening programmes so that it can be diagnosed quickly and recovery options are higher in that case.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The masticated breast cancer survivor sees her spiritual identity as trusting in higher power and prayer as a medium for recovery. Trusting in God through prayer was the means of dealing with illness during the phase of treatment. However, after the treatment process, the participant reported herself to be with enhanced faith and transcendence. Spiritual and religious believes stayed as one of the significant ways of dealing with the cancer experience. The literature conducted previously has also shown the parallel findings (Feher & Maly, 1999; Lauver et al., 2007; Subnis, 2011; Taleghani et al., 2006). These indicate that most of the survivors use spiritual and religious coping mechanisms during the phase of treatment and recovery phase.

Prayer acted as a medium to find solace. The positive aspects of prayer in helping survivors was similar to the findings of Lynn and Cornblat (2002). Throughout the cancer experience, the participant showed a sense of transcendence by entering into a higher level of meaning-making and enhanced concern and love for fellow beings. Participant started praying for other patients in a more specific manner especially during the treatment phase. These findings are similar to the previous exploration (Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2003; Carpenter, Brockopp & Andrykowski, 1999; Feher & Maly, 1999) wherein individuals found meaning in their everyday activities.

Literature about cancer experiences clearly indicates the role of spiritual believes in dealing with the traumatic experience. Starting from the initial diagnosis to the painful treatment procedure shows that

individuals tried to deviate the negativities by trusting the higher one, i.e., God. The spiritual identity revealed that God acted like a person whom they can rely on when things were not happening fine within their body especially during pain, chemotherapy and bodily disfigurement. The outcome of spiritual identity showed a newer spiritual self with enhanced transcendence.

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