

**MEANING-MAKING
COPING: EXPLORING
WAYS OF COPING WITH
CANCER IN AN
INTERNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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and Health**

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AIM

- **To carry out international studies on meaning-making coping (i.e., existential, spiritual and religious coping) among people who have been affected by cancer in a number of secular societies and,**
- **To try to understand the influence of culture on the choice of coping methods.**

METOD

- **Qualitative semi-structured interviews with persons with cancer diagnosis.**
- **The research group in each country uses, as a basis, the interview questions that were developed for the Swedish study; questions are modified based on the socio-cultural context of each participating country.**

THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

- **Six countries, Sweden, South Korea, China, Japan, Philippines and Turkey are included in the project.**
- **The majority of people in some of these countries do not identify themselves as religious;**
- **Secular spirituality is strong among the population.**
- **The result presented here concern only Sweden and South Korea.**

RESULTS OF THE SWEDISH STUDIES QUALITATIVE STUDY

- **New coping methods were discovered: “the existential coping methods”.**

SANCTIFICATION OF NATURE

In this method the patient:

- **seeks comfort in spiritual connection with nature.**

SPIRITUAL CONNECTION WITH ONESELF

In this method the patient:


- **does not seek for a spiritual relationship with God or another sacred power, but a “spiritual” relationship with herself/himself.**

POSITIVE SOLITUDE

- **This method is used as a way to reach a higher state of “spirituality” by being of himself / herself and thinking and reflecting on his/her situation and overcome the stressful situation which is experienced.**

ALTRUISM

- **The empathy / altruism as a coping method among Swedish cancer patients is not focused on managing the mental problems and stress by getting help or offer their services to others or engage others as we see in some religious coping methods.**

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- **The motivation here is not religious, but an abstract transcendent feeling, a feeling of being one with all existence and, of course, a tendency toward empathy and altruism.**

SPIRITUAL MUSIC:

- A method that some informants pointed out was the use of music as an important coping method to overcome the stress and anxiety that cancer has caused. Informants have considered music as a spiritual source as a healing method.

- Ahmadi, F. (2016) Coping with Cancer through Music; Three Studies among Cancer Patients in Sweden, in Mandana Hashefi (eds.) *Music Therapy in the Management of Medical Conditions*. New York. Nova Publishers. 135-152.

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RESULTS OF THE SWEDISH STUDIES QUANTITATIVE STUDY

- **As the results of the quantitative study among people who have hit by cancer in Sweden show, religious coping methods receives the lowest rankings.**
- **This indicates clearly that religious coping methods are not highly prevalent among cancer patients in Sweden.**

- **When it comes to “spiritual” coping methods, the ranking indicates that some spiritual coping methods are situated between 9th and 15th place, while others ranked very low (21st-23rd place).**
- **This shows us that “spiritual” coping methods are very moderately prevalence among people who are struck by cancer in Sweden.**

- **The most prevalent coping methods, as the study clearly shows, are the existential ones. These methods were ranked from 1st to 6th place. These quantitative results confirm those obtained in the qualitative study.**

SOUTH KOREA

- **The informants selected from among male and female cancer patients aged 18 years and older. None of the participants are chosen for their interest in religion or spirituality (The majority of interviewee used to be 65+).**

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS (N=33)

Characteristics		N
Gender	Male	17
	Female	16
Age	20~39	3
	40~59	15
	60+	15
Education	High school graduate or less	17
	College graduate or higher	16
Children	Yes	29
	No	4
Monthly Household Income*	Mid-low or less	14
	Mid-high or higher	19
Stage of Cancer	Early to 1 st	13
	2 nd ~3 rd	13
	4 th or worse	5
Employment Status	Housewife	7
	Student	1
	Working	15
	Retired/On leave	10
Religion	Buddhist	5
	Catholic	6
	Protestant	11
	No religion	11

BELIEF IN THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE

- **When asked about their most effective coping resource, some participants mentioned nature as their coping method.**
- **While suffering from cancer, participants believed that being close to nature would heal and console their mind and body.**

- **Such a belief in the healing power of nature can be divided into two themes:**
- *Mountains as a healer*
- *The healing power of natural foods.*

MOUNTAINS AS A HEALER

- **Participants seemed to strongly believe in the healing power of mountains. After being diagnosed with cancer, they tried to stay closer to a mountain because they believed it contained a healing energy that could revitalize all living things.**

THE HEALING POWER OF NATURAL FOODS

- **Concerning the healing power of nature as an effective coping resource, almost all of the participants mentioned natural foods.**
- **They believed that these foods worked as an anti-cancer medicine.**

MIND-BODY CONNECTION

- **Participants believed that a negative and complex mental state could cause the body to dysfunction. This can be interpreted as belief in a body-mind connection.**
- **Several participants mentioned the term “Ah-dung-bah-dung” in Korean, which means they did their utmost to survive and achieve material success.**

- **While struggling with cancer, participants tried to maintain a balance between mind and body, and to remain in a positive state of mind.**



- **We found two patterns of coping related to the mind-body connection:**


- *Peaceful mental attitude*

- *Positive life perspective*

PEACEFUL MENTAL ATTITUDE

- **Participants often stated that they tried to empty their mind of or push away everything they were obsessed with, whether these obsessions concerned their work or their relationships.**

- **Going through the psychological problems caused by cancer and thinking about the possibility of death made concerns about life issues and the meaningless of some relationships for them.**

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- **They believed that too much thinking about ethical and moral codes had made them stressed and caused their cancer. They began to be less concerned about these issues. The most important task after being struck by cancer was, as they explained, to try to attain peace of mind.**


POSITIVE LIFE PERSPECTIVE

- **Surprisingly, some participants appreciated having had or currently having cancer. The reason was that, as they stressed, the painful journey they had undergone made them feel more grateful in their present life and brought about ‘a turning point’ in their life – a new life and new attitudes.**

- **While struggling with cancer, participants used the positive-life-perspective coping method, either by interpreting the situation from a positive perspective or by strengthening their feeling of self-responsibility.**

RELYING ON TRANSCENDENT POWER

- **Regardless of whether participants were religious or not, they had prayed to God on their way to surgery. Regardless of how they defined a supreme power – the Lord, Buddha, their deceased parents, or the universe – they needed an omnipotent being to rely on.**


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- **Cancer surgeries do not necessarily lead to death, but participants felt a fear of death and worried about the family members who would be left behind. Religious people had their own coping methods in concert with their religiosity, and those who were not religious were also consoled by some coping methods, such as spiritual meditation.**

FINDING ONESELF IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

- **When asked about the most helpful coping resource for cancer, several participants mentioned “the people around me.”**
- **Feelings of loneliness are not uncommon when people are struggling with cancer. The participants explained that when they were dealing with cancer, they came to realize they were not alone.**


COMPARISON

- Although experiences of cancer differed for each participant, either in Sweden or in South Korea, participants had in common what can be called '*a turning point in life*'.
- Struggling with cancer was a great ordeal for each individual, but the struggle did not end only as an ordeal. Experiences with cancer gave participants an opportunity to appreciate the small things in daily life,


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- **Just as in the study with Swedish participants, the Korean participants also found relief in the healing power of nature.**
 - **Korean people tend to understand the universe and their living environments based on the theory of Yin-Yang and Five Elements.**

- **The reason participants in the Koreans study believed in the healing power of mountains and natural foods is probably because they understand the mechanisms of nature as being based on the theory of Yin-Yang and Five Elements.**


- **Koreans share the oriental philosophy that human beings are part of nature and will return to nature, which is the root of all living things.**

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- **Finally, Korean participants reported that realizing people would take care of them and help them cope with their illness was a positive aspect of having cancer, because it made them think about what they could do to help others.**
 - **The cancer patients in Sweden expressed gratitude for those who helped them during their illness, but what helped many was the coping method “positive solitude.”**

- **Koreans tend to be guarded and wary of social interaction. Prior to diagnosis, participants guarded themselves against other people so as not to be hurt by them.**
- **However, after experiencing cancer, participants came to realize that they were loved by the people around them and that they did not need to be wary of human relationships.**

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- **Feelings of gratitude for the unconditional care they had received caused them to reflect on their life and their relationships with others. Participants wanted to get along with people rather than stay alone at home. Awareness of their relationships with others helped participants cope with cancer.**

- **This project shows the importance of different existential coping methods; it indicates that when existential questions come into the picture in coping, even non-religious coping methods should be seriously taken into consideration. Moreover, the study shows clearly the impact of culture on choice of coping methods.**

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- **Thus, it is important to investigate the cultural context when we explore coping resources and meaning-making experiences among cancer patients.**
 - **Future researchers are encouraged to design a longitudinal study to investigate the changing patterns of coping and meaning-making among cancer survivors living in different countries.**

PUBLICATIONS

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- 1. Ahmadi, Fereshteh. (2015) (red.). *Coping with Cancer in Sweden – A Search for Meaning*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- 2. Ahmadi, Fereshteh. (2008). *Kultur och Hälsa*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- 3. Ahmadi, Fereshteh. (2006). *Culture, Religion and Spirituality in Coping; The Example of Cancer Patients in Sweden*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- 4. Ahmadi, F.; Park, J.; Mee Kim, K. & Ahmadi, N. (2016) Exploring existential coping resources: the perspective of Koreans with cancer. *Journal of Religion and Health*. (http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-016-0219-6?wt_mc=internal.event.1.SEM.ArticleAuthorOnlineFirst)

- 5. Ahmadi, N. & Ahmadi, F. (2015). The Use of Religious Coping Methods in a Secular Society: A survey study among cancer patients in Sweden. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*. 1054137315614513, first published on November 18, 2015 as doi:10.1177/1054137315614513
- 6. Ahmadi, F. & Ahmadi, N. (2013). Nature as the Most Important Coping Strategy among Cancer Patients: A Swedish Survey. *Journal of Religion and Health* 52(4):1177-90.
- 7. Ahmadi, Fereshteh (2013). Music as a method of coping with cancer: a qualitative study among cancer patients in Sweden. *Art and health*. 5(2):152-165.
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