Knowledge of Nursing Journal Summer 2023,1(2): 121-128
http://knjournal.ir

Original Article Open Access

Spiritual Lived Experiences of Patients with a History of COVID-19: A Phenomenological Study

Mohammadreza Changiz[1], Fatemeh Mohammadi-Shirmahalleh[2]*, Marjan Mardani-Hamoleh[3], Mohammadreza Seirafi[4]

[1]. PhD Candidate in Health Psychology, Department of Psychology, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran.
[2]. Assistant Professor, Department of Health Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Karaj, Iran. ***(Corresponding author)***
[3]. Associate Professor, Nursing and Midwifery Care Research Center, Psychiatric Nursing Department, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
[4]. Assistant Professor, Department of Health Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Alborz, Iran.

Abstract

Background and objectives: This research aimed to explore the spiritual experiences of patients who had had COVID-19, as spirituality is believed to provide support and aid in coping with stress and illness. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a significant public health issue globally, including in Iran.

Materials and Methods: This qualitative study was conducted with a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Data were collected between November 2022 and May 2023. The researchers held interviews with 14 patients admitted to a hospital in Tehran, capital city of Iran. Data were analyzed based on the approach of Dickelman et al. Lincoln and Guba criteria including credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability were used for assessment of data trustworthiness.

Results: It was found that spiritual experiences of the participants can be divided into 3 themes including “Psychic Experiences”, “Experiences of Deferring” and “Spiritual Dream Experiences”, and a constitutive pattern named “the Experience of the Holy”.

Conclusion: The constitutive pattern of "the Experience of the Holy" and its 3 themes highlight the deep impact of spirituality on the experiences and recovery of illness and emphasizes the importance of addressing the spiritual needs of patients in health care settings and the role of spirituality in dealing with illness and promoting spirituality.

Key words: Spirituality; Lived experience; COVID-19; Hermeneutic phenomenology.

*__Corresponding author__: Fatemeh Mohammadi-Shirmahalleh, ORCID ID:0000-0002-3179-4099, Email: m_mohammadi1352@yahoo.com. **Received**: August 2023, **Accepted**: September 2023, **ePublish**: Summer 2023.
Citation: Changiz M, Mohammadi-Shirmahaleh F, Mardani-Hamooleh M, Seirafi, M. Spiritual Lived Experiences of Patients with a History of COVID-19: A Phenomenological Study, Knowledge of Nursing Journal. 2023;1(2):121-128.

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on mental and physical health, lifestyle, and religious beliefs. COVID-19 is the most important challenge of present generations and, perhaps the most critical global crisis since WWII [1-5]. COVID-19 epidemic has revealed that man's intellect and science are suffering from false pride, the lifestyle of modern world are suffering from fundamental problems, and returning to spirituality is the main lesson that should be learned from this unfortunate event [6]. The pandemic has also revealed the limitations of the modern world and the need to return to spirituality. The healthcare system was ill-prepared to handle the pandemic, and it has become clear that no country is immune to such outbreaks [7-10]. The pandemic showed that no country with any number of resources is immune from such an outbreak [11, 12].

Sometimes, the emergence of pandemics such as Swine flu in 2009 and Corona in March 2020 challenges the previous knowledge and "rises a multitude of new questions in all mental and physical fields". Therefore, the significant role of spirituality and spiritualism in the lives of patients and the request of them to receive spiritual care have intensified the need to know and understand the spiritual lived experiences of patients. Recognizing and understanding the lived experiences of patients lead to the acquisition of knowledge in this field [13-16]. Considering the importance of this crisis, the researchers sought to find the interpretation of spiritual lived experiences of patients with a history of COVID-19. This study explored the answer to this question: What do spiritual experiences mean in patients with a history of COVID-19?

Method

In this study, the phenomenological approach of Heideggerian hermeneutics to gain a new understanding of spiritual lived experiences was applied [17, 18]. The participants were 14 patients with a history of COVID-19 admitted to Imam Hossein Hospital in Tehran. The inclusion criteria were alertness and willingness to express one's experiences and feelings of religion and not suffering from mental illnesses or cognitive disorders (according to medical records). The participants have recovered from COVID-19 and were selected with maximum variation in terms of age, sex, and marital status. Permission was obtained from ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, Karaj branch (ethics code: IR.IAU.K.REC.1401.085).

Semi-structured interviews were performed to collect data on the patients' spiritual experiences during hospitalization. Some of the questions were: "Who would you like to have by your side when you got COVID-19?", "What did spirituality mean to you at that time?", and "How did you feel about spirituality when you got COVID-19?" The interviews were both virtual and face-to-face with an average time of 45 minutes. Virtual interviews were carried out due to patients' requests and through phone calls. Supplementary interviews were not needed since they gained richness. Data were analyzed based on the approach of Dickelman et al. [19]. A set of criteria, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used to ensure the rigour and credibility of the findings [20]. The research team also examined the process of data collection and analysis. Findings were shared with the participants and one expert with a degree in religious studies. To check

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

the reliability of the findings, an external observer who was familiar with qualitative research checked and confirmed the findings. To check the dependability of the findings, an external observer, who was familiar with both the spiritual experiences and qualitative research, but was not a member of the research group, reviewed and confirmed the findings. Finally, to check the transferability, the findings were shared with two patients other than the participants with a history of Covid-19, who confirmed the findings.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Interviewee code	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Educational Status	Employment Status	Hospitalization (day)
1	F	54	M	D	UE	6
2	F	65	M	HL	UE	3
3	F	67	S	HL	UE	7
4	F	64	S	HL	UE	8
5	M	53	M	B	E	10
6	M	47	M	D	E	3
7	M	49	M	B	E	8
8	F	35	M	AD	E	34
9	F	55	S	HL	E	10
10	F	79	M	HL	UE	6
11	F	49	M	B	UE	8
12	M	57	M	B	E	9
13	F	62	M	D	UE	13
14	M	44	M	D	E	7

HL=High school and less; D=Diploma; AD= Associate Degree; B= Bachelor's degree; E=Employed; UE=Unemployed

According to table 1, the participants were between 35 to 79 years. Nine were women and 5 were men. Most of them were married (only 3 were single) and most of them were high school and less, and only 4 of them had a bachelor’s degree. Seven of them were unemployed.

Results

Data analysis showed that spiritual experiences of COVID-19 patients can be expressed with a constitutive pattern of "the experience of the Holy" which is formed through connecting subthemes and themes. Table 2 consists of 3 themes. These themes include “Psychic Experiences”, “Experiences of Deferring”, and “Spiritual Dream Experiences”.

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

Table 2. Classification of Expressions and Formation of Sub-themes, Themes, and constitutive pattern

Initial Codes	Sub-themes	Themes	Constitutive pattern
Out of body experiences; seeing intense light; meeting with unseen people; meeting with dead; hearing that world	Near-death experiences	Psychic Experiences	
Communication with spirits; precognition; meeting people of that world	Supra-sensory experience		
Trusting in God; relying on divine saints; resorting to Imams, resorting to divine saints; communicating with Imams; communicating with divine saints	Trust	Experiences of Deferring	The experience of the Holy
	Reliance		
Dreaming of divine saints (Prophets, Imams, etc.); meeting the deceased in dreams; true dreams	Real Like Dream	Spiritual Dream Experiences	
	Healing Dreams		

Theme 1. Psychic experiences

Sometimes, psychic experiences are reported by some people with real religious experiences [21]. Wuthnow [22] found that entirely different types of people may experience psychic and religious themes. Tanya Luhrmann [23], based on her anthropological fieldwork, proposed three kinds of experiences "that are manifested all over the world in various religions", which is a quasi-permanent claim. Spiritual convulsions (1st) include "dramatic and transformative events such as mystical experiences, near-death experiences, and out-of-body phenomena." On the other hand, sensory predominance (2nd) is illusion or perception of non-corporeal beings. According to Luhrmann, the trance phenomena (3rd) of intense prayer exercises are like speaking with spirits and Glossolalia. Subthemes of this theme are" Near-death Experiences" and "Suprasensory Experiences".

For some COVID-19 patients, this disease is associated with near-death experiences such as out-body experiences (observing the body and events around it), entering non-terrestrial realms along with hearing sounds and seeing intense light, or meeting the deceased people. Participant No.13 said: *"...A feeling of extreme lightness and an extremely white light. I couldn't walk at all, so I jumped down from the bed and asked what the bright white light was doing in this corridor. ...I was so happy that I wanted to go down that corridor and see the end of the light, but someone hit me on the shoulder and told me to go to sleep, and when I came back, my sole was not on the ground. ...This light was so white and bright and colorful that I could drown into it."*

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

Participant number 4 said: *"I was in the hospital. I didn't understand what happened... I went to after-life world and saw that my father was in a very clean and neat room, white and plastered. My father said that your room is on the side. And I went and looked and saw that it was like freshly rubbed straw... Then, I said that well I go to my room and my father came and told me to go out of the room. It's too soon to come, go back."*

Some of the COVID-19 patients had the experience of meeting people from afterlife world. In some of these experiences, the participants received messages such as premonitions for recovery or how to act for recovery or communicated with spirits. For example, Participant number 4 said: *"I was in the hospital... I felt bad and I went to afterlife world and saw... a lady with a pen in her hand and they were very tall and wearing a mask... she asked me why you came Here? She said I am responsible for destiny. She said that I write the fate of the children who are born into the world. Everybody."*

Participant No. 6 said: *"My cousin got corona at the same time as me and went to coma and died and I didn't know this before I was discharged. I saw him in front of my eyes! He told me that you are on leave. You are fine and you have no problem, and you are leaving. Two hours later, the doctor came and said, 'Ma'am, you are discharged'."*

Theme 2. Experiences of deferring

Almost all the participants stated that they trusted in God and Imams and asked them for help during their illness and hospitalization. Trust in God, in general, and recourse to Imams and divine saints, in particular, are rooted in Shiite Islamic culture. Subthemes included "Trust" and "Reliance". Participant number 1 said about this: *"I was calling out God and Hazrat Ali... I was saying, O Fatima Zahra, or Amirul Momineen, help me. I asked Hazrat Abul Fazl to help me."*

Participant No. 12 said: *"I have more devotion to Imam Kazem...I used to call Imam Kazem and wept."*

Theme 3. Spiritual Dream Experiences

During COVID-19, some patients saw the dreams of divine saints such as prophets, Imams, or their deceased ones, who gave them a message of health, or they recovered after these dreams. This theme is rooted in all ancient cultures and in Islamic culture. According to the opinion of Muslim philosophers, a true dream is an intuition that takes place in sleep; it is related to future and reveals secrets that are connected to the truth, and it is also mentioned in the Holy Quran. For the participants, this experience was a powerful spiritual source, it had a soothing function and brought the person the pleasure of being in a spiritual atmosphere. This theme has two sub themes: "Real Like Dream" and "Healing Dreams". For example, participant No. 2 said: *"I dreamed Hazrat Zahra and Hazrat Zainab several times during the corona and I was very sad. I saw Hazrat Zainab and she told me that we will help you."*

Participant number 14 said: *"I think I went into a state of trance or unconsciousness. In that dream state, it may not be believable now, but I saw 124,000 prophets in a state of unconsciousness, and one of them was Hazrat Ibrahim, and I recognized Hazrat Ibrahim. And then, they told me to say hello... But the Prophet came and pushed everyone aside. ...At that point the Prophet took my hand, and we stretched out our hands and a green light came into my palm. When this green light came in my hand, I got up."*

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

Constitutive pattern: "The experience of the Holy"

In short, based on our findings, the spiritual experience of the participants was the experience of the Holy. This experience was a reality in their personal life and was related to their daily experiences and actions. COVID-19 has brought difficulties and suffering for patients. Spirituality plays an important role in helping them face the challenges of COVID-19. They had near-death experiences, psychic experiences, and hypnopompic experiences. The study of Musapour et al. [9] showed that a kind of perceptive process and deep spiritual as well as existential transformation came into existence in people to cope with COVID-19. Kowalczyk et al. [24] showed that the fear and suffering of COVID-19 may lead to a spiritual renewal experience. Fardin [3] has mentioned in his review article that during the outbreak of COVID-19, spirituality was one of the appropriate methods to create mental peace.

The results showed that spirituality has always played as soul balm, and regular religious participation was associated with better emotional health outcomes. [24], when we are exposed to threats, we use various strategies for survival and faith is one of them, which allows us to remain hopeful and feel safe.

Discussion

The analysis of data related to 14 patients with a history of covid-19 in the age range of 35 to 79 years who had a history of hospitalization in Imam Hossein Hospital in Tehran, showed that the spiritual experience of covid-19 patients can be the constitutive pattern of "The experience of the Holy" and 3 themes (psychic experiences, experiences of deferring, and hypnopompic experiences).

Psychic Experiences

Researchers believe that near-death experiences (NDEs) have existed since the beginning of human creation, and for this purpose, we can point to the evidence that exists in some ancient writings and holy books [25]. The results of the present research, in line with various research, showed that these experiences, in almost all cases, carry deep psychological changes, such as reduction of the fear of death [26-30].

Experiences of Deferring

In addition to the above experiences, trusting and appealing to God and the innocents as close servants of God and seeking help from them and asking for healing from them were important and common aspects of the spiritual experiences of the participants in this research. In the Shia Islamic culture, innocents and pure Imams are people close to God and powerful spiritual sources [14].

Spiritual Dream Experiences

In addition to psychic experiences, some patients during the COVID-19 disease have seen the dreams of divine saints such as prophets, Imams, or the dreams of their deceased ones, who gave them healing messages, or after seeing those dreams, these people are recovered. The experience of dreams has always been important for people everywhere, for this reason, in most cultures, especially among Muslims, we encounter various beliefs and behaviors related to dreams, including dream interpretation [31-33].

The experience of the Holy

The constitutive pattern of "the experience of the Holy" and the 3 themes highlight the importance of addressing the spiritual needs of patients in healthcare settings as

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

spirituality can have a deep impact on their experiences and recovery from illness [34]. Healthcare providers should be aware of potential spiritual experiences and provide support and resources to help patients cope with their conditions.

Regarding to this fact that today the spiritual dimension in treatment of diseases is recognized and due to the wide dimensions of COVID-19 disease, it is suggested that health care teams use the findings of this study to expand educational programs and use spiritual-oriented services for patients suffering from COVID-19 or similar pandemics. Considering the importance of the spiritual dimension in the treatment of diseases, it is suggested that in the health care teams, a person or people should be trained for the necessary spiritual care or, as in the similar experience in other countries, religious assistants or clergy for this purpose should be based in medical centers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights about the spiritual experiences of patients with a history of COVID-19. The constitutive pattern of "the Experience of the Holy" and its 3 themes highlight the deep impact of spirituality on the experiences and recovery of illness and emphasizes the importance of addressing the spiritual needs of patients in health care settings and the role of spirituality in dealing with illness and promoting spirituality. Spiritual skills are important for health care workers in a catastrophic scenario such as the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the stress and psychological suffering of health care professionals as well as patients and their families.

Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to Dr. Mehrdad Haghighi, Head of the Infectious Diseases Department of Imam Hossein Hospital, who agreed to conduct this research at the height of the new influenza virus outbreak. The authors would like to thank Hojjat al-Islam Yusuf Aghazadeh Sola, a lecturer in the field and a senior expert in the philosophy of religion, for reading and commenting on the naming of themes and subthemes.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

References

1. Wang C, Pan R, Wan X, Tan Y, Xu L, Ho CS, et al. Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors during the Initial Stage of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease Epidemic among the General Population in China. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2020;17(5). doi: 10.3390/ijerph17051729.
2. Nishiura H, Jung SM, Linton NM, Kinoshita R, Yang Y, Hayashi K, et al. The Extent of Transmission of Novel Coronavirus in Wuhan, China, 2020. J Clin Med. 2020;9(2). doi: 10.3390/jcm9020330.
3. Fardin MA. COVID-19 Epidemic and Spirituality: A Review of the Benefits of Religion in Times of Crisis. Archive of SID Jundishapur J Chronic Dis Care. 2020 April; 9(2). doi: 10.5812/jjcdc.104260.
4. Arslan G, Yıldırım M. Meaning-Based Coping and Spirituality During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating E. Front Psychol. 2021; 12. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646572.
5. Jetten J, Reicher SD, Haslam SA, Cruwys T. Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19. SAGE Publications Ltd. 2020.
6. Sheikhrezaee H. Corona and Noetic Sciences. Iran Hekmat and Phalsaphe Research Institute. 2020. [Persian].
7. Pargament KI, Smith BW, Koenig HG, Perez L. Patterns of Positive and Negative Religious Coping with Major Life Stressors. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,1998,37(4):710-724.
8. Rahimnia M, Rasoulian M. Comparison of Adaptation Mechanisms of Adolescents of the Center for Correction and Education and High School Adolescents. Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology, 2006; 12 (1): 29 - 35. [Persian].
9. Musapur M, Changi Ashtiani J, Kahrobaei Kalkhuran Alya M. Spiritual and Existential Growth and COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study. Journal of Research in Psychological Health. 2020; 1 4 (1): 55 -70. [Persian].
10. Nasermoghadasi A. Corporeal World and Coronapoealypse. Logos Publications. 2020. [Persian].
11. Namazi H, and Monajjemi, A. Corona philosophy: Reflections on science, crisis and biopolitics. Narvan. 2020. [Persian].
12. Žižek S. Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World. OR Books. 2020.
13. Davis M, Lohm D. Pandemics, Publics, and Narrative. Oxford University Press. 2020
14. Momenifar S, Habibi Asgarabad M, Abbasi M. Explanation of the Spiritual Experiences of Breast Cancer Patients: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study. Health Spiritual Med Ethics. 2020;7(2):9-19.
15. Agarwal, K, Fortune, L, Heintzman, JC. Kelly, LL. Spiritual Experiences of Long-Term Meditation Practitioners Diagnosed with Breast Cancer: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Pilot Study. J Relig Health, 2020; 59(5): 2364-2380.
16. Abbasi M, Mohammadi N. Towards Spirituality After Coronary Artery bypass grafting: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study. Health, Spirituality and Medical Ethics, 2017; 4(1):10-5.
17. Heidegger, M. Being and Time. Harper and Row. 1962.
18. Zokaee MS. The art of conducting qualitative research: from problem finding to writing. Agah. 2020 [Persian].
19. Diekelmann N, Allen D, Tanner C. The NLN Criteria for Appraisal of Baccalaureate Programs: A Critical Hermeneutic Analysis. New York: National League for Nursing Press. 1989.
20. Lincoln YS, Guba EG. Naturalistic inquiry. London: Sage Publications Inc, 1985.
21. Hood RW, Spilka B, Hunsberger B, Gorsuch R. The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach, 2nd ed. Guilford, 1996.
22. Wuthnow R. Experimentation in American Religion. University of California Press, 1978.
23. Luhrmann TM. When God talks back: Understanding the American evangelical relationship with God. Knopf, 2012.
24. Kowalczyk O, Roszkowski K, Montane X, Pawliszak W, Tylkowski B, Bajek A. Religion and Faith Perception in a Pandemic of COVID-19. J Relig Health, 2020; 59(6): 2671–2677.
25. Etemadinia M. Living on the Edges: Three Discourses on Near-Death Experiences. Basirat. 2013. [Persian].
26. Van Lommel P, van Wees R, Meyers V, Elfferich I. Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest: a prospective study in the Netherlands. Lancet. 2001 Dec 15;358(9298):2039-45. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(01)07100-8.
27. Ring K. Life at Death, New York, Quill. 1980.
28. Ghasemiannejad-Jahromi A, Mehrabizade-Honarmand M, Hashemi SE, Beshlide K, Khojaste-Mehr R. The Investigation of Near-death Experiences, and Necessity of Awareness about its Elements. J Qual Res Health Sci 2018; 7(3): 337-48.
29.Ghasemiannejad-Jahromi, A. The phenomenology of Iranian and American Near-Deah Experiences [dissertation]. Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. 2017. [Persian].
30. Kopel J, Webb M. Near-Death Experiences and Religious Experience: An Exploration of Spirituality in Medicine. Religions, 2022; 13: 156. https://doi.org/10.3390/ rel13020156.
31. Marlow L. Dreaming across boundaries: the interpretation of dreams in Islamic lands. Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University. 2008.
32. Kuiken D, Lee MN, Eng T, Singh T. The Influence of Impactful Dreams on Self - Perceptual Depth and

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]

Spiritual Transformation, Dreaming, 2006; 16(4), 258–279.
33. Mahmudi V, Mazandarani AA. The Meaning and Function of Dreams in Islamic Mysticism. Journal of Religious Studies, 2021-2; 15(30): 215-239 [Persian].
34. Chirico F, Nucera G. An Italian Experience of Spirituality from the Coronavirus Pandemic. J Relig Health, 2020 May 18: 1–3. doi: 10.1007/s10943-020-01036-1.

[Downloaded from knjournal.ir on 2026-11-17]

[DOI: 10.61186/knjournal.1.2.121]