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

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**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.

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## 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

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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”.

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**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."*



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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."*



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**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



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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.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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