

## Phenomenological Examination of Spiritual and Religious Coping Styles of Mothers Grieving a Child with Cancer

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The death of a child is arguably the most difficult experience a mother can face, accompanied by numerous psychological traumas. Particularly, the death of a child due to cancer poses unique challenges. Therefore, the way mothers cope with this grief is of great importance to alleviate their distress and psychological damage. Among various coping mechanisms, spiritual and religious coping in grief, especially within a religious culture, holds a special place and significance. Accordingly, the aim of this research was to examine the spiritual and religious coping styles of grieving mothers based on their lived experiences.

**Methods and Materials:** This study was qualitative and phenomenological in nature. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation was employed. The sample consisted of 13 bereaved mothers who had lost a child to cancer in the city of Yazd. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Following the interviews, which were recorded, each interview was transcribed and analyzed using Colaizzi's method.

**Findings:** Ten themes emerged from the data analysis. These themes included resignation to fate, providence, gratitude, recalling the tribulations of the Imams, charity, recitations, divine testing, perspectives on death and the hereafter, prayer, and patience.

**Conclusion:** These findings suggest that spiritual and religious coping styles are significantly utilized by mothers grieving a child with cancer, and these themes could be used for effective interventions to reduce grief symptoms and educate on coping with grief.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Spiritual and Religious Coping, Grief, Cancer.

### 1. Introduction

The death of a child, regardless of the cause, is a traumatic event for both fathers and mothers. The death of a child, whether expected or unexpected, is one of

the most difficult experiences that parents may encounter (Hollander, 2016). Parental bereavement is one of the most intense, painful, devastating, and enduring forms of grief (October et al., 2018). Grief following the loss of a child elicits a more severe reaction of sorrow compared to the loss

of a spouse or parents (Stroebe et al., 2008). The loss of a child can have significant adverse effects on the physical and mental health of parents. Parents who have lost a child are at risk for long-term effects such as depression or anxiety, as well as increased psychiatric admissions. Parental grief can also impact the social framework of families, with some studies indicating increased marital disputes and divorce in such circumstances (Bergstraesser et al., 2015). Physical symptoms, health deterioration, psychological, existential, ontological, and social distress infiltrate the experiences of parents grieving the loss of their child, becoming part of their lives (Price & Jones, 2015). Along with psychological impacts, there is evidence that parental grief due to the death of a child can negatively affect the physical health of parents. Lower quality of life related to health, increased risk of heart diseases, and even elevated mortality are among these effects (Song et al., 2010). In these individuals, the risk of illness and mortality is higher compared to adults who have lost parents or a spouse (Dias et al., 2017). Additionally, parents with a sick child during their life and with the grief of a child need many interventions and aids to manage their stress (Tullis et al., 2021).

Parents' experiences during their child's illness and the final stage of his life have long-term effects on the reactions and outcomes of parental grief. In such situations where the child's life expectancy is limited, parental mourning begins before the death of the child and immediately after receiving the diagnosis and prognosis of the illness. Moreover, the necessity of long-term care and treatment before the child's death and over months and years adds to the psychological hardship of parents, and death may occur when parents feel that they are no longer able to cope through external and internal resources, thereby increasing their vulnerability to the death of the child (Jaaniste et al., 2017).

The severity of the difficulty of experiencing child grief and its numerous effects on the physical and psychological aspects of parents, especially mothers, increases the need for intervention in individuals, particularly with persistent and long-term grief. The concept of death, due to its semantic and value load in different cultures and as a key term in religious and spiritual issues, has been considered, and various rituals about death, mourning, bereavement, and related issues have had numerous recommendations and teachings. In Islam, considered the most complete religion for humanity in this regard, many cases have been raised that could be effective in reducing grief in people within the framework of an educational program and interventions. Discussing the why and philosophy of death, divine testing

and its philosophy, the pain and consequences of it, rewards and compensation to the afflicted, expressing ways to cope with grief, disaster, and hardship, the effects of satisfaction and trust in divine proximity, how to console and condole the survivors are some of the issues mentioned in Islamic teachings (Hamdan, 2008) that could lead to a reduction in grief in the bereaved.

Additionally, considering cultural considerations in grief-related interventions has special importance. Especially since grief has a rich history in religious literature. The reactions to grief and mourning in different cultures and religions vary. On the other hand, religion has been mentioned as an effective factor in people's mental health and as a coping style (Koenig, 2018). Some research emphasizes the need to strengthen the coping style of grieving individuals, stating it as an effective factor in people's ability to cope and face the phenomenon of grief (Cox et al., 2007). Religious beliefs influence an individual's perception of life stresses and challenges and, by giving meaning and increasing a sense of control, lead to reduced stress experience and tolerance of emotions resulting from grief (Bentzen, 2020). In this regard, especially Islam, within a comprehensive spiritual and religious system, has a unique culture in connection with grief that distinguishes it from other religions and cultures. According to many Muslim experts, Islamic beliefs and traditions can create a complete, comprehensive, and valuable therapeutic system for grieving individuals, especially those with abnormal or complicated grief (Mehrabiy, 2003). Principles and coping strategies in Islam such as patience and perseverance, the relationship between suffering and divine proximity, suffering and the purification of the soul, the tradition of testing and trial, and the afterlife are among the important teachings and instructions for working with clients with grief (Hamdan, 2008).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to phenomenologically examine the spiritual and religious coping styles of mothers grieving a child with cancer in order to identify effective coping styles in mothers and use them to reduce the harm caused by grief.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The design of the present study was qualitative and phenomenological. The sample consisted of 13 mothers in Yazd city grieving over a child with cancer in 2021. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation was used.

Sample sufficiency was determined by data saturation; after conducting 10 interviews, no new categories were added, but three more interviews were conducted for further assurance.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. After conducting the interviews with participants and recording them, each recorded interview was transcribed onto paper and analyzed using Colaizzi's method. It should be noted that after analyzing each interview and forming organized concepts, the next interview was conducted. This process continued until all interviews were completed. Data analysis involved multiple readings of the interviews to understand the context and the participants. The transcribed information was read several times to grasp the overall content, accompanied by listening to parts of the recorded data. In the next step, main codes and key phrases from each interview were extracted. Sentences and phrases related to the questions in the interviews were separated and stored in another file. This was done to ensure that even less significant information was not lost as it might become important in later stages. In the third stage, the meaning of each phrase was explained and summarized, with a brief description of its underlying meanings written for each significant sentence by two individuals. Then, the extracted meanings from the sentences were combined to form a common meaning. In the fourth stage, meanings were organized into clusters of codes. That is, the meanings derived in the previous stage were placed in separate clusters and discussed. In the fifth stage, codes were grouped into related clusters forming broader categories, and from these clusters, core concepts were derived. In the sixth stage, the

findings were discussed and described, and finally, we responded to the structure of the phenomenon.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Methods for assessing credibility and validity in this study included criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To increase credibility in this study, prolonged and continuous engagement, avoidance of premature conclusions without sufficient observations, constructive discussion of findings with unbiased and honest colleagues, a progressive mindset meaning monitoring the constructed frameworks, and documenting the change process from the start to the end of the study were effective. Participant review and confirmation of findings from the analysis by participants and researcher self-review during the data collection and analysis process were utilized. Transferability in this study was achieved through the development and rich description of the data set during collection and the use of specific coding methods. All interviews were conducted over 60 to 90 minutes and for reliability, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Coding was also performed by the researcher and another expert in the qualitative field and compared. Also, the review and matching of some qualitative researchers' opinions and the participation of research participants were used. In this study, to obtain confirmation, the researcher meticulously recorded all stages and reported in various forms so that others could use and follow up on necessary items if needed.

## 3. Findings and Results

The examination of the lived experiences of mothers in their spiritual and religious coping yielded ten themes.

**Table 1**

*Main and Subordinate Themes of Mothers' Coping Styles with the Grief of a Child with Cancer*

Row	Themes
1	Resignation to Fate
2	Belief in Divine Wisdom
3	Gratitude
4	Remembrance of the Imams' Tribulations
5	Charity
6	Recitations and Prayers
7	Divine Test
8	Contemplation of Death and the Hereafter
9	Prayer
10	Patience

Participants frequently utilized spiritual and religious strategies to cope with the negative emotions stemming from grief. These strategies included resignation to fate, belief in divine wisdom, gratitude, remembrance of the Imams' tribulations, charity, recitations and prayers, viewing it as a divine test, contemplation of death and the hereafter, prayer, and patience. Each of these will be explained further below.

**Resignation to Fate:** Participants who believed in destiny experienced less anxiety and sorrow, acknowledging that the event was God's will and that they played no real part in its occurrence, leaving them no choice but to surrender.

Participant No. 2: "It was God's will, what can be done? It's out of our hands. We tried hard, prayed a lot, but God did not want it, His will was that my child leaves us young. In this sinful world, he won't stay..."

**Belief in Divine Wisdom:** Individuals stated that God does not decree anything without considering the welfare and benefit of His servants, and there was a wisdom behind this event that ultimately held good for them and their child.

Participant No. 1: "I say it was God's will; give me strength God wanted it, God could have helped in this illness but didn't, it was God's wisdom. I couldn't believe my child wasn't there, my home was his home, I say my child is at home. The days the kids are here, I think of the kids. I don't think about this."

**Gratitude:** A strategy frequently used was gratitude towards God, especially when people lived with other family members, and their spouse and other children were alive and together, they were grateful for this blessing.

Participant No. 7: "It depends on the person. I used to say thank God, I am content. It was a gift you gave one day and took away another."

Participant No. 3: "I always say thank God my husband is still with me. I have these two children. I always say if I am ungrateful God might put something else in my path and I would say I wish I hadn't done that, hadn't said that."

**Remembrance of the Imams' Tribulations:** When participants remembered hardships and tribulations greater than their own related to the noble Imams, or when someone reminded them of these, they felt a greater peace and perceived their own suffering as less severe.

Participant No. 11: "I tell myself my child was no dearer than Ali Asghar of Imam Hussein, nor was he more beloved than the three-year-old Ruqayyah of Imam Hussein. I go to his grave, sit down and cry a little."

Participant No. 14: "What can I do? I wait. We are no greater than Lady Zainab, are we?! How much she suffered,

how she endured. We are no greater than her; we must endure, there is no choice."

**Charity:** Bereaved individuals would perform acts of charity and good deeds in memory of the deceased, believing these would bring rewards and peace for the deceased. They would engage in activities the deceased enjoyed or had previously done in their name.

Participant No. 7: "I do something charitable for him. I water my flowers and say it's for his spiritual benefit."

Participant No. 10: "I cook food with him in mind and give it away. Whatever he liked I give to someone in the hope it reaches him in the afterlife and makes him happy."

**Recitations and Prayers:** Reciting the Quran and various prayers and incantations were actions undertaken by mothers to find peace and cope with the negative emotions stemming from grief.

Participant No. 3: "I sit and read Fatiha, read the Quran, I talk to him a lot. I look at his pictures and imagine he is sitting next to me like you, alive and well, talking back to me."

Participant No. 5: "I turn on my phone and it reads for me, I feel at peace. The Quran reads. The only thing I do is sit where he used to pray, read the Quran; pray. I read the Quran and Tasbeeh for him, saying that place was where he always prayed. His prayer mat is always spread there. Every day I read the prayer of the covenant because he used to read it, I read it for him and in his place."

**Divine Test:** Understanding the loss of a child as a test, trial, and affliction from God allowed participants to find justifications for themselves, leading to greater peace and patience. The beliefs and convictions behind viewing it as a divine test made enduring the loss less difficult for them.

Participant No. 6: "Because we were in this situation and saw his suffering, it was a bit easier for us. I think we were subjected to a tough divine test and could accept it easily. It was hard at first, but I said a God who tests surely also gives the strength needed to endure."

**Contemplation of Death and the Hereafter:** Previous beliefs and perspectives on death and the afterlife served as facilitators for coping. Those who believed there is still a world where their child exists and has not truly perished had greater coping abilities. Also, those who believed in the reality of the afterlife and the insignificance of this world saw this condition as temporary and were able to endure this suffering.

Participant No. 4: "One day we all came, one day we all return. No one is meant to stay in this world; no one. It's

someone's turn every day, now it's fate, the wisdom of God."

Prayer: Seeking prayers especially for the health and well-being of other survivors, and requesting patience and strength from God to cope with bereavement were very important tools for mothers.

Participant No. 8: "Grieving is very hard I always pray, I say God give me patience so I don't cry in front of my sick child. I just ask God to give me patience."

Participant No. 13: "I always say God help me, help me to endure, it's very hard but I pray my husband and my children are with me and I can endure."

Patience: Enduring this misfortune was another strategy used, whether consciously or unconsciously, out of necessity.

Participant No. 9: "Being a mother and seeing a young child and husband, after my daughter's death, it's very hard but there is no choice, whatever comes from God must be endured. I sacrifice to God, He gives us patience."

Change in Perspective on Creation: After the death of a child, participants expressed that their outlook and priorities in life had changed, reflecting on the transient and temporary nature of the world and deeming many issues unworthy of attention. Only health mattered in this valueless world.

Participant No. 9: "There is no choice. If you don't think of the hereafter what good is this world? You're going to Mashhad, in the end, you have to return to live your life. Wherever you go, you return to your place but there's no way back in the hereafter. We must answer. God willing, may God forgive our sins. May our hereafter be good, this world is of no use. When you lose someone dear you understand."

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Currently, religion and spirituality, and their integration, are applied in various areas of psychotherapy and coping with loss and bereavement. These findings are consistent with the results of prior research (Bentzen, 2021; Cox et al., 2007; Dias et al., 2017; Hamdan, 2008; Koenig, 2018; Mehraby, 2003).

The set of beliefs and convictions individuals hold significantly influences their coping and management of stress. These beliefs affect individuals' assessments of impactful events and consequently guide the selection of coping strategies. Given that religion itself encompasses a set of beliefs and a belief system, it becomes particularly effective in difficult situations, especially in coping with grief, facilitating an assessment that influences an

individual's coping method. One such influence is assisting in finding meaning for the loss. Research has also shown that religion and spirituality can play a role at all stages of coping, such as cognitive restructuring of loss, selection of coping strategies, and achieving positive and effective outcomes (Pargament & Park, 2019).

When individuals face situations that they perceive as beyond their control, they are more inclined to utilize religious and spiritual coping strategies. Spiritual strategies and spiritual coping can be used both positively and negatively. In positive religious and spiritual coping, individuals experience a sense of spirituality, a secure relationship with God, meaningfulness in life, and a spiritual connection with others. As a result, in facing stress and loss, they experience greater self-esteem, value, and peace. However, in negative religious and spiritual coping, individuals turn away from God, experience a less secure relationship with God, have a pessimistic outlook, and engage in spiritual and religious struggles to find meaning in life, thus reducing their coping effectiveness (Exline & Rose, 2013).

One of the spiritual coping methods has been resignation to fate. Individuals believing in destiny knowing that the event was God-ordained and that they had no real role in it, and that there was no alternative but to surrender, experienced less anxiety and sorrow. When individuals have specific attributions for an event, they can also experience a different quality of emotion. The source and cause of an event, and where it stems from, play a crucial role in how individuals cope. When individuals attribute the source of loss to God and interpret God's act as flawless and based on benevolence and wisdom, they facilitate their own endurance of the loss.

Gratitude has been frequently utilized as a strategy. In interviews, gratitude was accompanied by a kind of submission and satisfaction, and the underlying belief and attitude is that God is wise and decrees the best for everyone. Additionally, in many cases, survivors have been grateful considering their possessions and other positive circumstances despite the absence of the deceased. They have felt appreciation and gratitude towards God for having other children, a spouse, and being with family. Also, the belief that gratitude can lead to an increase in blessings and, conversely, lack of gratitude and complaining can lead to God's displeasure and the loss of other blessings has made gratitude an essential part of their lives.

Remembrance of the Imams' tribulations has also been another strategy used. This remembrance serves as a model

from the lives of the infallible Imams in facing hardships and tribulations that the noble Imams have encountered. This modeling can prepare a person to choose the best way of coping and teach him the ways and means of living and coping with misfortune. The example of the Imams' confrontation with tribulations is a feasible and achievable model of coping in the worst possible conditions, hence can serve as a very good role model for individuals. The noble Imams faced hardships and tribulations throughout their lives, yet they endured these conditions beautifully and perfectly, thus they are an excellent model for coping and enduring loss and misfortune.

Charity for the deceased is a way of continuing and maintaining a healthy relationship with the deceased, as emphasized in Islam. This continuation of the relationship includes spiritual rewards and also brings peace to the survivors, feeling less loss and somewhat maintaining a form of connection with the departed loved one.

Recitation of the Quran and reading various prayers and supplications serve as reminders and attention to God, causing a feeling of presence in the sight of the Lord and also a reminder of the presence of God and mental peace. Focusing on God's presence and establishing a connection with Him through the recitation of the Quran and supplications brings a sense of backing and assurance, ultimately leading to peace and well-being for individuals.

God repeatedly in the Quran and the noble Imams in the hadiths have emphasized divine testing and trials as an unavoidable tradition of God. For testing, rewards and consequences have been stated that can increase the endurance of the survivors. Losing a person and encountering misfortune in the divine tradition leads to purification from sins, elevation of spiritual levels for individuals, and enjoyment of divine reward and blessings, which with this view of testing, makes enduring misfortune and loss more bearable for individuals.

The view and perspective that individuals have on death and the afterlife serve as facilitators for coping. The view of death and this world can be a useful schema and plan for survivors. Viewing the world as a transient place and a pathway that leads to an eternal world facilitates the endurance of pain and misfortune. In addition to this, comparing this world and the hereafter also leads to welcoming the other world and better coping with life's challenges. Viewing this world as a place without authenticity and associated with suffering and deficiency and looking at the other world as the eternal abode of humans and a place of reward and being near God prepares the

individual for meeting God and enduring hardships (Hamdan, 2008). Viewing death as a means of transition to the remaining world and an agent of real human life in another world, as an inevitable and certain matter, and also as a means of survival and not extinction and the ubiquity of death leads to easier acceptance of loss.

Prayer is a means of seeking help from the infinite power of the Creator and, consequently, requesting from a God who is capable of anything and, besides, is merciful and compassionate towards His servant, brings hope and a feeling of peace. Prayer in any form creates hope and reliance in the individual, thereby removing feelings of sadness and distress. Especially, prayer in situations where nothing can be done by human hands is an effective coping strategy for emotion regulation and also problem-solving for individuals. Many studies have also confirmed the relationship between prayer and mental health in individuals (Hamdan, 2008; Mehraby, 2003).

Patience is also a frequently used strategy. Patience means that individuals do not panic and despair in the face of a calamity or distress. In religious sources, patience in the face of calamity and misfortune has been described as one of the types of patience. Patience acts like an active force that enables humans to face calamity and misfortune. Patience leads to mastery over oneself and causes individuals to choose efficient coping methods. A patient person does not start fighting needlessly and at the same time does not surrender pointlessly but accepts realities and seeks logical strategies and crisis and loss management (Pakseresht et al., 2018).

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

One of the limitations of the current study was interviewing bereaved mothers due to the emotional turmoil which made the interview process slower and required strong empathy and management with the participants.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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