Challenges in Assessing Spiritual Distress in Survivors of Cancer

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Background: Many efforts have been made to better integrate spiritual assessment into the care of patients with cancer, with varying degrees of success in different parts of the United States. Little work has been done to describe challenges that face those who seek to implement assessment in busy ambulatory settings, particularly in the northeastern section of the United States.

Objectives: This study sought to test the feasibility of a screening process describing spirituality, distress, and spiritual transformation in cancer survivors after chemotherapy for lung or gastrointestinal cancer.

Methods: This descriptive pilot study took place in a rural National Cancer Institute–designated comprehensive cancer center, referral center, and outpatient medical oncology clinic. A web-based questionnaire was completed by 29 survivors, and 22 declined participation.

Findings: Respondents were primarily Christian, aged 60 years or older, and an average of 18 months post-diagnosis. The mean spiritual distress score was 1.38 (SD = 2.09), and the mean psychological distress score was 3.03 (SD = 2.73). Participants reported mean spiritual well-being, positive degree of spiritual growth, and little spiritual decline. The opportunity for spiritual growth among survivors creates a need for effective assessment and intervention to promote spiritual growth and mitigate spiritual decline and spiritual distress.

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Key words: spirituality; pastoral care; religion and psychology; cancer; survivors

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/15.CJON.99-104