Role of spiritual beliefs and prayer in health promotion of chronic patients: A qualitative study

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Abstract
Aims: Chronic diseases are the major cause of mortality all over the world. Long-term nature of chronic diseases causes the goal of treatment in these diseases to be shifted from the elimination and eradication of the disease to the maintenance of the function. Maintenance of the function requires the close communication of medical care, social support services, educational services and health promotion. The purpose of this study was the qualitative investigation of the role of spiritual beliefs in the promotion of patients’ health.

Methods: Using the qualitative study approach of content analysis type, 35 patients with cardiovascular diseases and diabetes referred to the educational-treatment centers of Tehran University of Medical Sciences, who had been chosen based on purposive sampling method, were interviewed. Line by line analysis of the obtained information was done using constant comparison and information recall-writing methods.

Results: The 5 main categories of "spiritual beliefs and lifestyle", "spiritual beliefs and self-efficacy", "spiritual beliefs as an adaptation mechanism", "religious practices positive effects on mental health of patients" and "spiritual beliefs challenge" were extracted from the data analysis. In some patients, spiritual beliefs decreased with increase in the duration of illness.

Conclusion: Spiritual beliefs, in addition to facilitating the patients’ confrontation with the negative psychological effects of chronic disease, reduce the patients’ depression and increase their satisfaction with life. Spiritual beliefs not only affect the way of coping with the disease, but also play an important role in the lifestyle of patients and increase the patients' linkage to the treatment regimen by creating the feeling of purposefulness. Religious activities are also used by patients as a consolatory agent to reduce anxiety, pain and depression.

Keywords: Spiritual Beliefs, Health Promotion, Chronic Diseases

Introduction
Chronic diseases are the main causes of mortality in the world. The rapid increase of chronic diseases represents major public health challenges worldwide. These diseases currently cause 60% of all deaths in the world and allocate 47% of world global load of diseases. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) prediction, by 2020, chronic diseases allocate more than 60% of world load of diseases [1]. It is predicted that by 2020 non-contagious diseases will allocate more than 80% of diseases of the world [2]. WHO report in 2000 also showed that in developing countries, more than 70% of deaths are due to chronic diseases. Iran is not exempted as a developing country. Chronic diseases have causes increasing challenges for health systems in many developing countries [3]. Chronic diseases are of challenging situations of human life and their management is the main health problem of global society. Since the medical approach to chronic diseases only concentrates on treatment methods and the control of symptoms and regarding the point that these diseases have various effects on individuals and societies, they should be specifically regarded and one should not only depend on medical models in caring of these patients [4]. These patients usually face a wide range of negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, depression and their self-respect and identity are affected by the disease, especially when the disease results in reducing the roles, valuable activities and changes in social communication and patients’ previous activities become difficult or impossible to perform due to disease [5].

The prolonged nature of chronic diseases change the treatment goals from the disease removal and elimination into maintaining the patients’ function that this requires close communication of medical care, social support services, educational services and health promotion so that the capacity and ability of self-care increases in these patients [6]. Today, health exaltation glares as new horizon in the healthcare system and exclusive focus on the disease and treatment has changed into wellbeing and care. Health exaltation means to reach individuals to their maximum potential [7, 8]. Therefore, the patients with chronic diseases should be able to perceive health in other dimensions such as psychological, spiritual and...
social aspects although they have physical limitations. Therefore, the individuals’ entirety should be regarded in care and the physical aspect shouldn’t be considered solely, in caring these patients [9]. In this study, the role of spiritual beliefs in promotion of patients’ health was investigated qualitatively.

Methods
In this qualitative study that was conducted in the hospitals affiliated to Tabriz University of Medical Sciences in 2009, the subjects were chosen based on purposive sampling method. Patients with chronic hypertension, post myocardial infarction patients, those with stable angina and diabetic patients who wished to participate, entered the study if at least one year had passed from their disease onset. While some variables appeared in the four initial interviews, the patients entered the study regarding the presence or lack of certain features such as different records of having certain diseases or lack of certain features based on the clarified variables. Thus, until data saturation, a total of 35 patients including 8 hypertensive patients, 8 post-MI patients, 9 patients with cardiac angina and 10 diabetic patients underwent in-depth interviews. The data obtained information was enriched by other methods of data collection.

Data from the interviews were analyzed under primary and secondary coding.

Results
Five stages of “spiritual beliefs and lifestyle”, "spiritual beliefs and efficacy", "spiritual beliefs as a coping mechanism, positive effects of religious practices on the mental health of patients” and "challenges of spiritual beliefs" were obtained from analyzing the findings of the research. Spiritual belief is the sense of dependence to an occult and strong force, and includes patients’ religious beliefs. Investigating the participants’ statements was indicative of the positive and negative effects of spiritual beliefs on patients’ health. Positive beliefs caused easy dealing with negative effects of chronic diseases, satisfaction with life and reduction of depression in patients. Praying was considered by patients as one of the ways of communicating with God through which prayers seek justice, submission of petition and compliance and this issue strengthens the individuals’ compatibility with stress. Avowing and almsgiving which are resulted from the religious beliefs of people are other factors which were applied by patients repeatedly in order to reach wellbeing and achieve physical and spiritual health. Attending spiritual events was presented as the factor of creating better relaxation and compatibility with the disease and other life problems. In addition, patients announced the spiritual beliefs as effective factors in their bonding to treatment Patients’ statements showed that beliefs such as “receiving help from God”, “health and death are the result of God’s will and If he wants he can return the patient’s health” and doing religious activities such as repeating a word or a phrase in pray, getting relaxation conditions during the religious activities, attending relaxed and spiritual environments such as mosques, etc. lead to effective compatibility with the disease and besides the promotion of spiritual health, will lead to the reduction of pain and suffer due to the disease, satisfaction with life and reduction of depression.

Based on the participants’ opinion, positive spiritual beliefs not only give meaning to the disease and helps the patient to adopt with the stress resulted from the disease, but also protects people and decreases the pain level, the lack of self-confidence and the feeling of social loneliness in physical and socio-psychological dimensions. This article shows the relation between mind, body and spirit. Therefore, the spiritual beliefs are effective in forming the process of patients’ adaptation can help them achieve a higher level of health. Negative spiritual beliefs that can exist from the beginning of the disease or they can appear through the long period of disease; can cause and this issue increases the depression and reduces mental health besides reducing the attention of patients to their therapeutic plan. Therefore, it reduces their level of health.

This belief inpatients that God does not pay attention to their request or wants to punish them because of their previous bad deeds by making them ill and that God does not hear them or cannot response to the requests of all creatures, increases the depression and leads to less adaptation with the disease. These claims show that negative spiritual beliefs can change the feeling of health and spiritual pressure in chronic patients the result of which are more depression, anxiety, social loneliness and fewer tendencies in observing therapeutic regimens and as a result, reduction of in health level in physical, spiritual and social dimensions.

Chronic patients faced with high physical and spiritual stresses and tried to reduce their effects to the minimum level with different methods that applying spiritual beliefs could reduce the effect of these stresses on both physical and socio-psychological
aspects of the person and lead them to a higher level of health.
The spiritual beliefs of patients had also affected their efficacy. Patients, who had high positive spiritual beliefs, felt a higher level of efficacy under the protective effect of these beliefs. On the other hand, patients who had negative spiritual beliefs, had low feeling of efficacy. Because the feeling that God or a hidden force helps them conquer the disease increases the efficacy of the patients. On the other hand believing that the disease is a punishment from God due to their previous bad acts reduces the feeling of efficacy in patients that this issue affects their level of health.

Positive and negative feelings were effective on patients’ level of health. Positive spiritual feelings facilitated chronic patients’ attitude towards the negative psychological effects, reduced their depression and increased their satisfaction with life and on the other hand, had improved the feeling of patients about the psychological dimension of the disease. Positive spiritual beliefs on the other hand, had increased their dependency to the therapeutic diet with the feeling of purposefulness in their affairs and had increased their level of health.

**Discussion& Conclusion**

Positive spiritual beliefs are important and effective positive factors in maintaining health and wellbeing and compatibility with the disease. Positive religious beliefs not only increase the feeling of health in spiritual dimension and consequently reduce the amounts of depression resulted from the chronic disease, but also increase their tendency to make optimal changes in their life style after the disease onset and to observe the treatment diet by creating the feeling of purposefulness in patients. Narayanasamy [10] has investigated the psychological compatibility mechanism in chronic patients in his qualitative phenomenological study. 15 patients were interviewed in this study and the results show that spiritual beliefs are the factor of patients’ compatibility with the disease. Patients’ spiritual beliefs regarding the meaningfulness and purposefulness of affairs and keeping hope in God’s help are considered as important psychological compatibility mechanisms in chronic patients in the mentioned study.

Olphen et al. report that involvement with religion leads to individuals’ protection regarding the psychological aspect and physical health. In his research, going to church is significantly related to decrease in the amount of depression and these people are in better condition regarding general health. Improving faith in patients causes easy confrontation with the negative effect of chronic diseases and on the other hand membership in churches can increase the access to the resources and solve the patients’ problems besides creating social communication [11]. Positive and negative religious beliefs can provide essential psychological protection for the patients. Bonadonna [12] believe that there are some techniques inmost religions of world that cause relaxation in people and conduct people toward being good. Using relaxation techniques is an effective factor in reducing the anxiety, pain and depression in patients with cancer. Coyle [13] also emphasizes the importance of spiritual beliefs in acceptance and compatibility with changes. In this study, also, religious beliefs were effective factors in the process of health promotion .In addition, positive religious beliefs of chronic patients who usually confront with physical and psychological stressful events were used for compatibility by subjects and could operate as compatibility elements and led to removal of psychological pressure or cause the decrease of stress in patients through forming patients’ compatibility process with disease.

Strawbridge et al. [14] in a study showed the relation between religion and consistency of receiving appropriate medical cares. Büssing [15], also, shows the significant relationship between positive religious beliefs and psychological wellness in chronic patients. There is strong relationship between the spirituality and power of compatibility with the disease in chronic patients and the existence of psychological and religious beliefs cause the decrease of pain level, social loneness and increase in satisfaction with life and decrease of depression. Spiritual belief is important factor in maintenance of health, wellbeing and compatibility with the disease and the feeling of psychological wellbeing is increased with increase of age and improvement of the disease [15]. In addition, there is relation between spirituality and the power of compatibility with the stress, disease and decrease of disappointment and anxiety and spiritual beliefs are the key element in hopefulness [16]. Religious beliefs have strong effect in improving weak sanitary behaviors [14]. Having spiritual beliefs has the power of prevention, improvement and compatibility with the disease. Patients’ spiritual beliefs protect them against hopelessness. Spiritual beliefs cause stress removal, maintenance of hope and control on the disease, and feeling of meaning and purpose in life [15]. Negative spiritual beliefs were observed in a low percentage of patients. The results showed that negative spiritual
beliefs in patients cause depression in most of them, lower the compatibility of patient with the disease and lead to patients’ non-observance of treatment regimen and decrease the level of health in physical, spiritual and socio-psychological dimensions. The findings of current study showed that positive spiritual beliefs are replaced with negative spiritual beliefs in few patients. This issue can have negative effect on promotion of patients' health.

The findings of current study show that religious beliefs have protective effects and cause the reduction of stress level in patients as an emotional compatibility mechanism, but these findings are different from the result of study of Narayanasamy [10] regarding the effect of psychological dimension as a compatibility mechanism in chronic patients. Probably, regarding the special social and cultural condition of Iran, religious and psychological beliefs play an important role in changing the life style and linkage to these changes. In addition, findings showed that as the duration of the chronic disease and the symptoms increased, spiritual beliefs became weaker and the patients lost the protective effects of these beliefs, that this issue can reduce the amount of patients’ observance of the new life style that will result in reduction of patients’ health level in some cases. The findings of the present research clarified the point that one should pay attention to the relation between mind, body and spirit while chronic patients’ care planning, because in most cases the spiritual dimension of this relation is not considered. This is while psychological care is an important strategy in compatibility of patients with stresses.

Considering the above issues, having positive spiritual beliefs stimulates power in the life, health, behaviors and the individuals’ relationship and gives meaning to disease from patients’ view and strengthens them in dealing with stress. Positive spiritual beliefs also lead to physical and psychological balance in patients. Considering the point that one of the important challenges in accessing health is to increase the power of people in compatibility, spiritual beliefs can be effective in solving this challenge. Therefore, considering the importance of this factor in promotion of patients' health, paying attention to this factor is essential in training and consulting patients to provide essential psychological protection in order to conquer the stress factors in patients.

References