

Utilization of Religion and Spirituality by
African American Cancer Patients in Coping with their Illness

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African Americans experience health disparities in most chronic diseases, including cancer. Spirituality, religion, and faith - all part of the spiritual context - are meaningful aspects of this culture. A well-established positive association exists between religion/spirituality and cancer coping. Less well-established is how they are related, which aspects of religion/spirituality are important for coping. Knowledge about the nature of this relationship would enable us to develop enhanced faith-based support efforts. Qualitative methods were used to study whether, and if so how, African American cancer survivors use religion and spirituality in coping. Participants (N=23) were recruited from physician offices, and each completed a 1-1.5 hour semi-structured interview. An inductive process was used in the data analysis using an open coding method. Regarding religion, themes that emerged included control over one's illness, emotional response, importance of social support, role of God as a healer, relying on God, importance of faith for recovery, prayer, scripture study, and how one makes sense of the illness. Spirituality themes reflected connectedness to God, self, others, and the world. Participants reported gaining a new perspective on life as a result of their experience. Clearly, participants had much to say about the role of religion and spirituality in coping, indicating that African Americans perceive that these factors play a strong role in their cancer coping and survivorship. The findings underscore the value of the religious and spiritual contexts for the support of well-being, quality of life, prevention of, and coping with disease in the lives of African Americans.