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EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Health as a movement between suffering of life and meaning in life for men who have experienced transitions in life

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Previous studies show that life transitions can have negative effects on men's lives and lead to health problems and meaninglessness in life. This study aims to deepen the understanding of men's health by exploring the movement between suffering of life and meaning in life when experienced life transitions.

Theoretical Framework: The study is anchored in Eriksson's caritative caring theory. Core concepts are health and the movement between suffering of life and meaning in life.

Methodology and Methods: The methodology is hermeneutical, and the study has a qualitative research design. Fifteen men from Norway participated in in-depth interviews in 2021. The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Four themes emerged in relation to the suffering of life; enduring separation from community, shame at being useless as a human being, grief over what has been lost in life, and being powerless and vulnerable in the face of a hopeless struggle. Three themes emerged in relation to meaning in life; realising what is most important in one's life gives strength, decision to live one's life brings joy in life and a positive attitude towards life gives freedom and awakens a new spark for life.

Conclusion: Suffering of life emerges as a separation from relationships and society and as a perceived uselessness as a human being losing faith, control and feeling like a burden erodes dignity and trigger feelings of shame, guilt and degradation. Suffering of life manifests as loss of drive and spark for life. Life has meaning through finding the good in oneself, coming to know and believe in oneself and seeing new possibilities which bring about a spark for life, gratitude, dignity and freedom. Health exists in the movement between suffering of life and meaning in life, in pausing, recognising vulnerability, prioritising and reorienting oneself.

KEYWORDS

caring science, in-depth interviews, life transitions, meaning in life, men, suffering of life, thematic analysis

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INTRODUCTION

A transforming life change can turn an individual's life upside down and greatly affect everyday life and health. Life transitions may require a high investment of resources over a significant period of time [1] and can even result in feelings of meaninglessness and is described by Eriksson [2] as suffering of life. Life transitions and losses are inevitable in human life and to separate the human being from suffering is to deny the reality of life [2]. While life changes and suffering can be part of human beings' lives, suffering is intertwined with a search for meaning in life and a movement towards health [3, 4]. Consequently, with the aim of attaining a deeper understanding of men's lives and health, this study focuses on the movement between suffering of life as an effect of life transitions and a search for meaning in life. This study is part of a larger collaborative project with community impact named, A life worth living. The focus is on men's health and life without a gender perspective with a focus on gender-based differences. In an ontological sense, we assume that there are no gender-related aspects in suffering of life and meaning in life, but that the forms of expression can depend on contextual factors where gender aspects may be significant. Previous studies also clearly show gaps in studies that seek a deeper understanding of middle-aged men's health during transforming life transitions.

BACKGROUND

A review of previous research limited to the contexts where the interviews were later planned to be conducted, to life transitions in terms of illness, divorce and unemployment. Aware that there are several contexts, the choices were made since the research interest is this study focused on men between 30 and 55 years of age and that these three contexts are prominent in this age group. The choice of three different contexts was made to provide variety and breadth.

Previous studies demonstrate that a diagnosis often involves a transforming life transition. Earlier research shows that the diagnosis came as a shock, as the illness is still associated with suffering and death [5]. Mental ill health is not uncommon among men within the first year after receiving a diagnosis [6, 7]. A study by Granek et al. [6] shows that cancer in men is linked to illness-related, social and existential factors. Illness may entail the loss of bodily functions and an altered body image, as well as side effects caused by treatments. The illness can also lead to socioeconomic stress, loneliness and lack of social support and changes in family relationships.

According to Love et al. [8] men are afraid of becoming dependent upon others and of being a burden. In a study by Nakash et al. [7], men describe a sense of meaninglessness and a decreased value as a result of their illness, because they can no longer do the things they used to be able to do before they became ill. They feel uncertainty regarding the future. Research reveals that men experience difficulties in adjusting to daily life, building a new identity and often lack the ability to face their own mortality [7, 9]. Men also seek support and information less than women as this is perceived as a weakness and less manly. What gives them comfort is support from family and friends, and belief in a higher power, and the men also take responsibility for shaping their own future [5].

Divorce is a common life transition that can have negative effects in terms of losing a central relationship and changing meaning structures that have been important in daily life [3]. Negative effects include increased alcohol use [10, 11] risk for poorer health habits [12, 13], decreased mental health [14, 15], loneliness and lack of social support [16, 17] and increased mortality [18]. On the other hand, divorce can also lead to personal development, finding a new perspective in life and a new life companion. Support from others and spirituality help men after divorce, but here the men emphasise that self-care is pivotal for the future. [19, 20]

Traditionally, men's identity, status, self-esteem and human value are connected to their work. Consequently, unemployment is a life change that can lead to increased mental ill-health, psychosocial and economic stress [21] and to an increased use of drugs [22], cardiovascular disease [23] and higher risk for suicide and suicide attempts [24]. A supportive environment helps men who have lost their work and so do personal qualities including optimism, a focus on problem-solving and self-reflection [25].

Research highlights negative effects such as health problems and meaninglessness in life. Studies also reveal that life transitions can lead to an opportunity for personal growth and development and that men emphasise problem-solving and responsibility.

AIM

The aim of this study is, therefore, to deepen the understanding of men's health by examining the movement between suffering of life and meaning in life in a context of life transitions. The present study is part of a larger project on men's life and health for the purpose of contributing knowledge to developing the praxis of care and health-promoting work in healthcare.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on a hermeneutic research approach, this study proceeds from the description of a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in caring science, specifically Eriksson's theory of caritative caring [26, 27], and the notion of suffering and health as integrated parts of human life [28]. Eriksson [26] describes the suffering that the human being experiences when life changes or when going through losses in life as suffering of life. Suffering of life can also give life a new meaning in life if there is reconciliation with and the ability to see new opportunities in the new life situation. Health is described as a movement between suffering of life and meaning in life and can constitute a driving force in human life and human becoming. Health is in this study seen as a movement between suffering of life and meaning in life, and a motive towards human becoming and health. Health as becoming includes a willingness to live and grow as a human being. Eriksson [29] indicates that health has no meaning in itself unless life has a meaning and, therefore, we must understand health as something beyond health, as life itself.

METHODOLOGY

The study has a qualitative research design, and the research approach is inspired by Gadamer's [30] hermeneutical philosophy. A deeper understanding is sought by engaging the pre-understanding in a movement between the text in its entirety and its parts. Methods have been chosen following the methodology and include elements of interpretation and abstraction.

Data collection and participants

In-depth interviews according to Kvale and Brinkmann [31] were chosen as the method of data collection. The interviews were conducted in Norway in 2021, both face to face and digitally due to the ongoing global pandemic of coronavirus disease. The informants were invited to participate through posters in various organisations and centres. In addition, the snowball method was used. A total of 15 men participated in the interviews. All men met the selection criteria. They were in middle age, between 30 and 55 years old, and had experienced major life transitions in relation to disease, divorce, losses or unemployment within a time interval of 1–5 years. Six men were affected by illness, six men had undergone a divorce, and three had lost their jobs. During the interviews, it turned out that many of the men had experienced several major life losses in their lives or that one loss had led to another, such as

lost relationships and loss of loved ones and experiencing grief or losing the right to shared custody of children.

The goal of the in-depth interviews was to let the men freely talk about their experiences in a spirit of dialogue. Four researchers conducted the interviews considering context awareness and geographical proximity to the participants. Three of the interviewers had a Ph.D. and one had a master's degree. All interviewers worked as lecturers at a university. All the interviewers had previous experience interviewing vulnerable people. Pilot interviews were carried out, and the researchers carefully discussed how to be as coordinated as possible in the actual interview situations. Some general questions were asked to ensure responses to the research questions and similarity in conducting the interviews. Questions such as: Can you tell a little about the loss you have gone through? How has the loss you experienced affected your life and you as a human being? What has given you the strength to live your life after the loss? Great emphasis was placed on having a non-prejudiced and open approach. The men were open and had a great need to talk about their experiences. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min.

Analysis and interpretation

The 15 interviews were transcribed into 146 pages of text with rich and deep reflections on experiences owing to life losses. They were analysed with a reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke [32, 33]. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen given that it is consistent with the study's theoretical assumptions and hermeneutic methodology. Three researchers participated in the analysis phase. The thematisation was carried out in five steps. In the first step, the researchers read the interviews several times to become familiar with the text and to obtain a first overview of the men's accounts. In the next step, the interviews were re-read, and meaningful topics were coded. In the third step, the codes were interpreted into themes according to how they related to each other, and how similarities and variations became visible. In the fourth step, the themes that were close to each other were brought together through abstraction and the themes were named based on essence and content. In the last step, the themes were organised in a logical order and the results were written down with citations that confirm trustworthiness.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Participants in the study can be considered as a vulnerable group, which means that ethical considerations and

regulations have been considered and followed throughout the implementation. The study was approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics in Norway and the researchers consulted the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) for ethical permission, data management, and data protection. Given the characteristics of the study, the men that participate voluntarily were informed about the aim of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. It was important to emphasize research ethics by treating the men with caution and respect and they were given an opportunity to discuss their experiences during the interview afterward.

The strength, and at the same time the weakness, of this study may be that a total of four researchers interviewed the men and, in addition, two researchers were involved in the analysis phase. Therefore, it was important to plan the interviews well and that all researchers were able to take part in the various stages of conducting the study. To include in the analysis researchers who did not themselves participate in the interviews was a strength because they had a certain distance from the interview situations.

FINDINGS

Seven themes were uncovered through the qualitative thematic analysis. Four of these themes were in relation to the suffering of life: enduring separation from community, shame at being useless as a human being, grief over what has been lost in life and powerless and vulnerable before a hopeless struggle. Three themes emerged in relation to meaning in life: realising what is the most important in one's life gives strength, decision to live one's life brings joy in life and a positive attitude to life brings freedom and a new spark for life.

THE SUFFERING OF LIFE

Enduring separation from community

To be cut off from life means being excluded from everyday life and to try to endure this situation. Life transitions often involve loss of community and involuntary loneliness. Involuntary loneliness refers to being left out of community, to lack a relation to people who are important in one's life or to a sense of not belonging anywhere. Being cut off and excluded from a community means not being seen, heard, believed or understood by anyone.

I have had a circle of friends... today I am completely isolated... Not once did someone

in the wider community contact me to ask: "Are you OK?" or "Is there anything we can do for you?" so in a way you felt like you were completely abandoned.

In isolation, trust in one's environment is easily lost and there is a deep longing for someone to ask and really listen to how one is and how one feels. Separation from a community is also about losing control over what has happened and over one's whole life. The thoughts revolving around life and its meaning can sometimes appear very dark and static, and it is difficult to find one's place and see opportunities for change in the future.

Shame at being useless as a human being

Life transitions give rise to frustration and sadness over the life that once was and to the experience that one's own personality may be lost in the process, that one can no longer be the person one wishes to be and that one does not live a life based on who one is deep inside, and feelings of being a less worthy person.

I feel like I'm not a whole man, in a way. So I simply don't feel like a whole person. I feel like a B item in a way. Other sorting... you are no longer the prime mover you were before.

Feeling useless means no longer doing things that were previously a matter of course or losing confidence in the body's ability to work the way it did before, and no longer having the same physical strength or being able to live up to the ideal image of a man. Feeling useless is thus about not being able to be useful and live up to one's role as a spouse, parent, life partner or work colleague.

The loss of one's old self is coupled with fear of not measuring up and feelings of guilt and shame. Life transitions arouse feelings of guilt, shame, humiliation and fear of not being good enough. The fear of being labelled can lead to the desire to hide and withdraw from family and friends, loneliness and isolation.

Yes, there is a lot of guilt. An insane amount of guilt... As a result I isolated myself completely for a period of time, and didn't want contact with my family because this was so shameful.

Grief over what has been lost in life

The loss of pieces that have been important in life evokes a sadness that is difficult to put into words. Grief entails

a longing to return to one's old life and everyday life as it used to be, and sadness and bitterness over the limited opportunities to do what previously enriched life. Grief also involves having lost a part of oneself and the person one once was. It is about losing one's inner drive and strength and entails a shattered faith in the future and having lost the spark for life.

I still miss some of my old self. The illness destroyed both the person and the whole dream you had, and the faith in the future.

Powerless and vulnerable before a hopeless struggle

Life transitions and loss are experienced as a hopeless struggle characterised by powerlessness. In this struggle, many different emotions rage within: one of the men described how he was *bleeding inside*. The powerlessness is heavy to bear and can result in an overwhelming tiredness or fatigue that makes it difficult to keep fighting. Self-destructive thoughts arise in moments when it is difficult to find a solution, the future seems bleak and one feels like one is a burden to others.

... there's a ghost on my shoulder all the time... I balanced on a knife's edge... I was one phone call away from taking my life. The joy I felt is only a memory. It's strange to find yourself in a situation where nothing gives you joy. Joy has become a foreign word.

To surrender to or be confronted with what is difficult leads to a complete loss of joy in life. Life has value in itself, but meaning in life is lost.

MEANING IN LIFE

Realising what is most important in one's life gives strength

Life transitions, when health has failed or the pace of life has slowed down, often give time to stop because life itself and everyday life no longer continue as it used to do. To withdraw for a while, isolate oneself, and detach from everything and everyone to relate to, gain distance from, and process what happened can be useful. One of the men said; ... *that in a way I had come to a place where I was capable of taking over myself*. In a time of seclusion, there is space for emotions such as despair and sadness over

what has happened. In solitude, it is possible to let go of pride, the ideal image of male strength, to give room to acknowledge the stress of the situation, show vulnerability and be able to say; *You know what, I'm not doing well, I'm doing pretty damn poorly*. The seclusion and pausing then becomes a moment to gain control over what happened and find new strength. In seclusion, there is space to work through, stop, reorient and begin to focus one's attention on what one actually feels is meaningful and most important in life.

I don't think I can say that I have become a better person... but I probably felt the value in pausing... so I sat down and thought to myself; what do you want with your life?

Decision to live one's life brings joy in life

The way back is a process, a struggle and a path that can be taken step by step, slowly but surely small progress is made in the right direction. The first step is to accept the situation and the consequences with which one must live. By accepting what has happened, one can feel forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and calmness in relation to what happened and begin to believe that things will fall into place. It is important not to give up and lose one's own will and way.

I've had quite a lot of determination... so even though it's been a hopeless struggle at times, I've felt, I've still managed... that is, I've never completely given up even though I've been close a few times.

To be able to engage in this struggle and find a way to live on, and find a solution in the new situation, conscious choices are required. These choices are seen as a challenge, something that must be done and they must come from within, one cannot expect that someone else will do it for one. The decision to take charge and do something to leave the pain is the way to find new joy in life. One of the men described it as a matter of trust, as a permission to live one's life because it is something that one wants to do and because life in itself is a gift.

When you decide and take the small steps, and you feed yourself with the positive experiences, and you pat yourself on the shoulder a little, then slowly but surely you build up the joy of life again... life is a gift in itself and I will appreciate that. I am engaged in my life, it is one of the things that gives me joy in life.

A positive attitude to life brings freedom and a new spark for life

Although life sometimes stops and feels bleak and heavy, the joy of finding a new path and making a decision to make the best of the situation can banish the darkness. When what has happened is turned into something that belongs to life, the realisation that life itself contains both ups and downs gives life itself meaning.

At times you need a break in life to understand what's going on. That's not to say I have the key or understand everything, but I've felt an improvement and I've come to know what to avoid. It actually saved my life. I think so.

To take on life's challenges can turn into joy if one stops and is present and does one's best in everyday life. This positive attitude towards life can bring joy and a sense of gratitude for things already achieved, and it can also awaken a new spark for life. Turning what happened into something positive can provide strength to decide for oneself, influence one's days and to be in control of one's life.

I did not own my life; life owned me. I have decided that I will own myself and own the day. And the adversity I face I have to turn into something positive in one way or another and use it to make myself stronger.

By changing the situation and seeing the positive in what has happened the gaze is riveted towards new possibilities. Gradually happiness in everyday life, along with gratitude and a feeling that it is good to be alive emerges. Then the life transition can also be viewed as something positive that was necessary to find something new in oneself, to take one's life back and find novel paths in life. Making up one's mind does not come by itself, but gradually one can find new ways and pick up the pieces. If one has a background of bad choices it can be important to not allow these choices define who one is, but instead try to find the good in oneself as a person. It is always possible to take charge of oneself even if it is not always possible to have control over life. Through the realisation that it is not always possible to have control over life, it is possible to better understand it. Change means coming to know new sides which means that the image of oneself changes. Taking charge and becoming more aware of who one is creates new opportunities and brings strength and patience.

Gradually placing oneself at the centre, taking oneself and what one wants increasingly into account, provides strength and freedom to set new limits and puts less focus on living up to the demands and obligations of others, or

satisfying other people's expectations. To say no, the realisation that one is good enough and that one also has the right to be respected by others for the choices one makes in life, takes practice.

... now you stand on the threshold of a new life. You have now drawn a line and left the other behind you, and now you have drawn the circle around yourself, so now the possibilities of going forward are open.

INTERPRETIVE DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are interpreted in relation to Eriksson's theory about health, the suffering of life and meaning of life, in accordance with the selected theoretical framework and hermeneutical methodology. The findings reveal the suffering of life as being cut off from the community and feeling useless as a member of society and a human being. The men felt grief, shame and guilt because the transition in life has crushed their future and they had lost control over their lives and themselves as human beings. In their mind, they had become a burden to others and so failed in their responsibility to themselves and to others. They felt life was lost and that they had no value as human beings because they were no longer fit and useful. The findings highlight that shame and guilt eat away at a human being's dignity, which is a suffering of life that deeply raises the question of meaning in life. Life transitions made the men feel powerless, meaningless and tired, and the focus in life becomes one of enduring. Degradation and disgrace rob of all drive, the spark for and joy of life, power and strength to fight. Based on the findings the men are faced with a lifetime of suffering that includes their entire life situation and their entire person. According to Eriksson [2, 4], suffering is part of life and the path of suffering is an individual's journey. In the study, suffering of life manifests as an outsider and being faced with something that is experienced as an inescapable fate. In this moment, the person is powerless and vulnerable. Suffering of life is occurring in relation to life transitions as feeling invisible, violated and rejected. Not being seen, heard, believed or understood in turn gives rise to frustration, bitterness and fear.

Previous studies show that suffering can prevent a human being's growth, self-realisation and strength, but it can also have meaning and be a positive source of power for life and health [cf. 19, 20]. The findings of this study show that the suffering of life also enables men to discover new sides of and find good in themselves as human beings. The finding is consistent with the assumption that health is a movement between suffering of life and meaning in life is

a driving force in human life and a motive towards human becoming [29]. Faith in oneself and to see the good in oneself gives a new understanding of what is good and important in the own life and open for seeing new possibilities. Meaning in suffering thus means to confirm self, goodwill towards self, and to have the courage to encounter the unknown in self to realise one's innermost core, and to try to understand and realise and better understand one's innermost self and the meaning of one's life [cf. 4]. The men experienced meaning in life in terms of freedom, dignity, strength, joy, gratitude and new spark for life. This corresponds to research by Bergbom et al. [28] which emphasises the concept vitality as an essential dimension for the movement of health that strengthens and gives freedom, desire, joy and meaning in life. Also, Eriksson [4] indicates that a human being seeking to find meaning in suffering is a way of confirming one's own dignity. The findings reveal the importance of responsibility, decision and choosing to find strength, joy and zest for life. The possibility of becoming is thus found within the self and in the awareness of one's innermost desires. Through listening to these desires new resources, paths and alternative courses of action towards health can be released which, in turn, increases the degree of freedom for the human being [cf. 29].

This study shows a movement towards one's own interests, and longing for what awakens the desire to move on. Suffering is transformed into zest for life and joy at the realisation of new undreamed of possibilities in the current life situation [cf. 2, 29]. The findings show the struggle between suffering and the will to live. According to Eriksson, [2] the struggle between suffering and will to live is the core of all human life. Without this struggle life would be empty and without movement. Suffering is a struggle for the individual's dignity and freedom to be a human being. Even though the struggle may look dark, the movement itself, the attempt at reconciliation with the life situation or to view suffering as a part of life, can allow for a glimpse of light to penetrate the darkness. The meaning of suffering emerges as a positive attitude to confirm one's own dignity, lead a meaningful and honest life and realise the person one is within, and in this way feel happiness and satisfaction. The findings suggest the importance of having free time for reflection to shed pride, show vulnerability, allow despair and grief to emerge, and in this way be able to reorient and prioritise. To pause and reflect is important [cf. 25] for becoming aware of the freedom to decide, choose and have the courage to break the chain that have fettered the men, and for instead shape their own lives and thereby health as something beyond health, as life itself [cf. 29].

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CK, KK and LN contributed to research design and data analysis. KK, KMT, BMH and GCW contributed to data

collection and commenting on the manuscript. CK was responsible for the writing the manuscript and LN contributed to writing the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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