



## Phenomenological Exploration of Cancer Patients' Emotional and Psychological Experiences with Herbal Remedies

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### ABSTRACT

The use of herbal remedies has long been a key aspect of alternative medicine particularly in the treatment of chronic conditions like cancer. While the clinical effectiveness of herbal remedies has been studied extensively, less attention has been given to the subjective experiences of individuals using these treatments. Existing research has not adequately explored how patients emotionally and psychologically engage with herbal remedies as part of their cancer care. In this study, we adopt a descriptive phenomenological approach, specifically Moustakas' method, to explore the lived experiences of 15 cancer patients who use herbal remedies, aiming to understand the emotional and psychological impacts of these treatments. Through semi-structured interviews, we identified key themes including emotional relief, skepticism about efficacy, and the significant role of social support in shaping experiences with herbal remedies. These findings indicate that while herbal remedies provide emotional comfort and a sense of control, patients often experience ambivalence towards their effectiveness. The results emphasize the need for a more integrated approach to cancer treatment which balances both clinical efficacy and emotional well-being, and suggest avenues for future research on the integration of alternative therapies in conventional cancer care.



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## INTRODUCTION

The use of herbal remedies has a long history across various cultures, where plants and natural substances are employed for medicinal purposes. This practice is particularly prevalent in regions where access to conventional healthcare may be limited or where traditional medicine continues to play a vital role in daily life (Grimm Jr. dkk., 1996). In many cultures, herbal remedies are not only viewed as physical treatments but also as integral to a holistic approach to health, encompassing emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being. However, while the therapeutic potential of herbal remedies has been widely acknowledged, particularly in the management of chronic conditions like cancer, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals experience the use of these remedies on a personal level, especially in terms of their emotional and psychological impacts.

The relevance of this phenomenon is underscored by the growing interest in alternative medicine as part of cancer treatment regimens. As cancer patients often face significant psychological distress, including anxiety, fear, and depression, the use of herbal remedies may provide a sense of control and comfort (Barber & Gibson, 2009). These remedies can offer psychological relief, which may not be captured through clinical outcomes alone. Additionally, the cultural and social significance of herbal medicine may play a critical role in shaping the experiences of patients, further complicating the understanding of its true impact on the well-being of those who use it.

Given the subjective nature of individual experiences with herbal treatments, there is a pressing need for research that delves deeper into the lived experiences of users. A phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for exploring these experiences, as it emphasizes the exploration of

meaning and understanding from the participant's perspective. By focusing on how individuals interpret their use of herbal remedies in the context of their personal cancer journey, this study aims to uncover insights that are often overlooked in more clinical research, which typically focuses on the effectiveness of such treatments rather than the psychological and emotional dimensions. This exploration is crucial not only for advancing theoretical knowledge but also for providing practical insights into how herbal remedies may support the emotional well-being of cancer patients.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals using herbal remedies, especially within the context of cancer treatment, has emerged as a significant area of study in recent years. This growing interest underscores the need to explore not just the clinical effects of herbal remedies, but also the personal, emotional, and psychological experiences of users (Connell dkk., 2005). Understanding how individuals perceive and interpret the use of herbal treatments within their cancer journey is crucial for a more holistic understanding of their overall well-being. However, capturing these experiences is far from straightforward and requires methods capable of delving deeply into the subjective dimensions of the phenomenon.

One of the main challenges in studying such experiences is the methodological limitation of traditional quantitative research, which often overlooks the nuanced, individual perceptions that are central to understanding the true impact of herbal remedies. Quantitative studies typically measure outcomes such as symptom reduction or survival rates, but these approaches fail to capture the richness of personal meaning and emotional responses to treatment. The reliance on numerical data in these studies also limits the understanding of how patients make sense of their experiences in the broader social and cultural context. As a result, many important aspects of the user experience remain unexplored, particularly those related to personal empowerment, emotional comfort, and the sense of control that herbal remedies might provide.

The inability of traditional methods to fully address these subjective experiences highlights the need for a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding lived experiences and the meanings individuals attach to them, provides an effective lens for exploring the complex ways in which people experience herbal treatments in the context of cancer care (Morton dkk., 2018). This approach allows researchers to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences and how these experiences shape their emotional and psychological well-being, making it an ideal method for uncovering the underlying meanings that quantitative methods often miss.

While existing research on the use of herbal remedies in cancer treatment often relies on practical, clinical approaches to evaluate efficacy, these methods fall short in capturing the depth of individual experiences. The majority of studies tend to focus on measurable outcomes such as symptom reduction, survival rates, or side effects, which provide valuable information from a clinical perspective. However, these approaches do not fully address the psychological, emotional, or subjective dimensions of how patients experience their treatment. This gap leaves a significant portion of the patient's journey unexplored, particularly the personal meanings they attach to the use of herbal remedies, the sense of control or comfort they may derive, and how their experiences intersect with their broader cultural and social context.

The limitation of such traditional methods lies in their inability to uncover the nuanced, lived experiences of individuals. They miss the essence of how patients interpret their treatment choices and the emotional relief, or distress, that may accompany the use of herbal remedies (Bramham & Lightstone, 2012). As such, the understanding of the overall impact of herbal medicine on cancer patients remains incomplete. Given these shortcomings, the need for a more holistic exploration becomes clear.

To address this gap, adopting a phenomenological approach is essential. Phenomenology allows for the exploration of the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, providing insights into the psychological and emotional aspects of using herbal remedies. This method offers a richer, more detailed understanding of how these remedies fit into the lives of cancer patients, including their perceptions, beliefs, and emotional responses. By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenology enables researchers to uncover the deeper, often unspoken dimensions of the phenomenon, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the role herbal treatments play in cancer care.

Previous research has explored various aspects of herbal remedy use, particularly in the context of chronic illnesses like cancer. Studies often focus on the clinical efficacy and physical outcomes of these treatments, providing valuable insights into their effectiveness. However, there is limited exploration of the subjective experiences of individuals who use herbal remedies as part of their cancer care. Literature on phenomenological approaches to healthcare emphasizes the importance of understanding the personal meanings patients attribute to their treatments and how these experiences affect their overall well-being. In particular, research by authors such as Schuster Bruce dkk (2018) highlights how phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of patient experiences beyond measurable outcomes, revealing how they make sense of their illness and treatment.

To address the existing gaps in the literature, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals using herbal remedies for cancer treatment. Phenomenology was chosen because it provides the tools to examine how participants perceive and make meaning of their experiences with herbal remedies. This method is particularly suited to the study's aims, as it emphasizes the exploration of emotional, psychological, and personal dimensions that remain largely overlooked by quantitative studies. By focusing on the subjective experiences of cancer patients, the study seeks to offer insights into how herbal treatments influence their psychological and emotional state, answering the need for a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

The structure of the article is designed to guide readers through the research process, from the initial introduction to the final conclusions. After this introduction, the article presents an explanation of the contextual background of herbal remedies and their use in cancer treatment, followed by a detailed description of the phenomenological methodology (Schmieder, 2015). The subsequent sections focus on data collection through in-depth interviews, data analysis using thematic and interpretative techniques, and a discussion of the findings, which emphasize the meaning and impact of herbal remedy use from the perspective of patients. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the insights gained and offers recommendations for future research in the area.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals using herbal remedies in cancer treatment. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings and lived experiences of participants, providing a rich understanding of how they perceive and make sense of their engagement with herbal treatments (Si dkk., 2019). The phenomenological focus on subjective experiences is particularly relevant for understanding the personal and emotional impact of herbal remedies, as it allows participants to express their individual experiences without the constraints of predetermined categories or hypotheses. The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological approach, which is characterized by its emphasis on interpreting participants' lived experiences within the context of their social and cultural realities, providing insights into how they understand the significance of using herbal remedies in their cancer treatment.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct experience using herbal remedies for cancer treatment were included in the study. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 or older, who were currently or had previously used herbal remedies as part of their cancer treatment regimen. Participants were required to have at least one year of experience with herbal treatments to ensure that their perspectives were rooted in a sustained engagement with the practice. Individuals who had not used herbal remedies or who were unable to communicate their experiences effectively were excluded. In total, 15 participants were involved in the study, with a gender distribution of 8 males and 7 females. The average age of

participants was 58 years, and they represented a range of cultural backgrounds, which enriched the diversity of perspectives shared during the interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences freely while still focusing on key areas of interest, such as the emotional and psychological effects of using herbal remedies and their perceptions of the treatment's effectiveness. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private settings to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment (Liljehult dkk., 2020). Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. A semi-structured interview guide was used to direct the conversation, though flexibility was maintained to allow for the emergence of new topics relevant to the participants' experiences. The interview guide was based on prior research and theoretical frameworks, and minor adjustments were made to suit the specific context of this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method that focuses on identifying and interpreting the meanings participants attach to their experiences. The analysis followed a systematic process beginning with the transcription of interview data, followed by initial coding to identify significant statements or phrases. These statements were then grouped into themes based on their relevance to the research questions. Thematic analysis was used to extract key themes that illustrated the psychological and emotional impact of herbal remedies on participants' cancer treatment experiences (Nyaaba dkk., 2019). NVivo software was utilized to aid in organizing and categorizing data, though the focus remained on the interpretative nature of the analysis. The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the themes into a coherent narrative that captures the essence of participants' lived experiences.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent before participating, which ensured that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Fahey dkk., 2020). Data were stored securely and anonymized to protect the identities of the participants. The research adhered to ethical standards in accordance with both local and international guidelines for conducting research with human participants, ensuring that participants' rights were respected throughout the study.

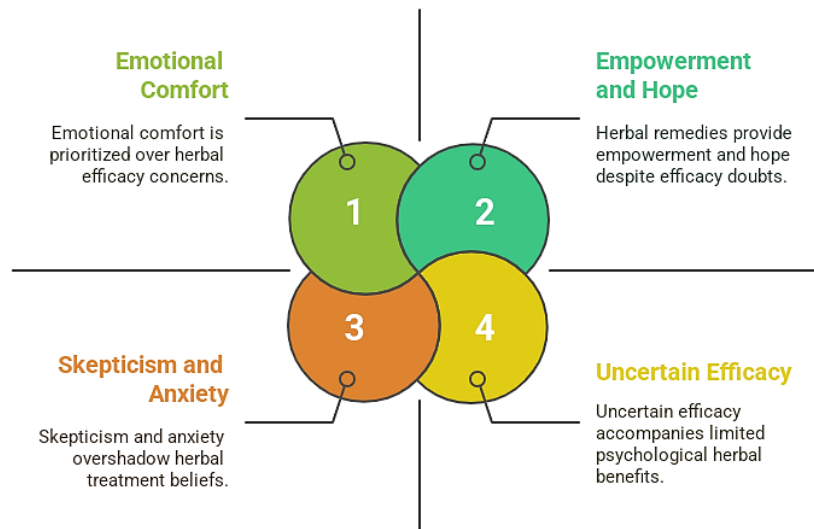
## **RESULTS**

### **Psychological Impact of Herbal Medicine Use in Cancer Treatment**

The first major theme identified from the interviews with participants was the profound psychological impact that the use of herbal remedies had on individuals undergoing cancer treatment. Many participants reported that herbal medicines provided a sense of hope and emotional relief, which they felt was crucial in managing their mental state during the course of their illness. As one participant shared, "Using herbal remedies made me feel like I was doing something positive for my body. It helped me cope with the stress and fear of the disease. Even though I couldn't fully trust it, it gave me peace of mind." This sense of empowerment was a common sentiment expressed across multiple interviews, with herbal treatments being perceived as complementary to conventional therapies.

However, while the emotional benefits were frequently highlighted, there was also a consistent undercurrent of skepticism and anxiety about the effectiveness of herbal medicines. Some participants questioned the long-term efficacy, stating that while the herbs offered temporary emotional comfort, they were uncertain about their impact on cancer progression. One participant remarked, "I don't know if the herbs worked. But they helped me deal with the anxiety and the waiting... It was a mental support more than anything."

## Psychological Impact and Efficacy of Herbal Medicine in Cancer Treatment



### Perceived Efficacy and Trust in Herbal Remedies

The second theme explored was the varying perceptions of efficacy regarding herbal remedies. Participants consistently expressed mixed views on the effectiveness of these treatments, with some feeling that the herbs were an essential part of their treatment regimen, while others remained uncertain about their benefits. As one participant explained, “I don’t know if they actually helped with the cancer itself, but they definitely made me feel better. There’s this sense of relief when you believe you’re doing something natural.” In contrast, another participant expressed doubt: “I used them, but I always wondered if they were doing more harm than good. I never got clear answers from my doctors, so I just kept going on faith.”

The lack of clear information and guidance from medical professionals regarding the integration of herbal treatments into formal cancer care seemed to contribute to these mixed perceptions. Participants who had more positive experiences with herbs often had access to community knowledge or anecdotal evidence from others who had used herbal remedies with perceived success. These informal sources of information played a significant role in shaping the trust participants placed in herbal remedies.

### The Role of Social Support in Herbal Remedy Use

The third theme identified in this study was the significant role of social support in shaping participants' experiences with herbal remedies. Participants who had strong social networks, such as family or community groups, tended to report more positive experiences with the use of herbal treatments. This social support not only influenced their decision to try herbal remedies but also provided emotional encouragement and validation. One participant noted, “My family was very supportive. They helped me find herbs and encouraged me to keep using them. It felt good to have someone to talk to about it.” In contrast, those without strong support systems often felt isolated and uncertain about their choice to use herbal remedies, leading to feelings of self-doubt and emotional strain.

Additionally, social support was seen as vital in reinforcing participants' sense of control over their health. Participants who were able to share their experiences with others found that it mitigated feelings of helplessness. As one participant described, “Talking to other cancer patients who also used herbal remedies made me feel less alone. It was comforting to know others were going through the same thing.”

The essential findings of this study suggest that the use of herbal remedies in cancer treatment has significant psychological and emotional impacts on patients. While the effectiveness of herbal treatments remains uncertain, the emotional benefits, including a sense of hope and relief from anxiety, are central to participants' experiences. The role of social support emerged as a key factor in

shaping these experiences, influencing both the decision to use herbal remedies and the psychological outcomes. These findings highlight the importance of considering the emotional and social aspects of herbal medicine use, particularly in the context of chronic illness like cancer.

## **DISCUSSION**

The primary findings of this study reveal the complex psychological and emotional impact of using herbal remedies in cancer treatment. Participants reported a range of subjective experiences, from feelings of emotional relief and hope to skepticism regarding the efficacy of the treatments. These findings offer insight into how herbal remedies provide not only physical support but also emotional and psychological comfort, highlighting the role of such treatments in enhancing the overall well-being of cancer patients. In addressing the research question, this study emphasizes the significance of personal meaning-making in the use of alternative therapies, particularly in the context of a life-threatening illness.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of herbal remedies in cancer treatment by focusing on the lived experiences of users, offering insights that are often overlooked in clinical research. The emotional and psychological effects of herbal remedies, as highlighted by the participants, provide new perspectives on how patients cope with cancer. The findings support the notion that herbal remedies offer more than just physical relief—they are a vital component of the coping mechanisms that individuals use to navigate the challenges of cancer. This contribution enhances the understanding of how alternative therapies can be integrated into a broader approach to cancer care, focusing on the patient's emotional, social, and psychological needs in addition to clinical outcomes.

When comparing these findings with the existing literature, the results both align with and extend previous studies on the emotional benefits of alternative treatments. Similar to the findings of previous research (Moucheraud dkk., 2022), this study emphasizes the psychological support provided by herbal remedies in times of health crises. However, unlike many previous studies, which have largely focused on clinical efficacy, this study contributes by exploring the subjective experiences of users and uncovering the emotional nuances of their engagement with herbal treatments. The findings also build upon the work of phenomenological researchers like Solberg dkk (2021), who argue that a phenomenological lens allows for a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' experiences with health and illness. In contrast to studies that focus on objective data, this research emphasizes the lived experience, reinforcing the argument that psychological and emotional dimensions are integral to a full understanding of health interventions.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings from this study have significant implications both for clinical practice and for understanding the broader social and cultural context of herbal remedy use in cancer treatment. From a clinical perspective, the emotional and psychological benefits of herbal remedies should not be underestimated. While the clinical efficacy of these treatments remains an area of ongoing research, this study highlights the importance of considering the emotional comfort that patients derive from using alternative therapies (Rodríguez-Montolio dkk., 2023). These findings suggest that healthcare professionals should acknowledge the psychological dimensions of cancer care, encouraging patients to share their experiences with alternative treatments and providing support for these coping strategies. Additionally, this research sheds light on the cultural and social significance of herbal remedies, especially in communities where traditional medicine plays a vital role in the health-seeking behavior of individuals. By recognizing these aspects, healthcare systems can better support patients in integrating alternative therapies alongside conventional treatments, thus offering a more holistic approach to cancer care.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be considered. One limitation is the sample size, which, while sufficient for a qualitative study, may not fully represent

the diversity of experiences across different demographics or cultural backgrounds. Participants were predominantly from a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may present their experiences in a manner that aligns with socially desirable outcomes. The study's phenomenological methodology also focuses on depth rather than breadth, meaning that while the findings offer valuable insights into individual experiences, they cannot be generalized to all cancer patients using herbal remedies. These limitations highlight the need for future research to explore a more diverse set of participants and to use additional data collection methods to further validate the findings.

### **Future Research Directions**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, further studies could examine the role of cultural factors in shaping the experiences of cancer patients who use herbal remedies. Investigating how different cultural understandings of health and illness influence the effectiveness and perceived value of herbal treatments could enrich the current understanding of alternative medicine. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the long-term emotional and psychological effects of herbal remedy use in cancer treatment could provide valuable insights into the lasting impact of these therapies (Mazza dkk., 2023). Future research could also explore the integration of herbal remedies into formal cancer care protocols, examining how healthcare providers can better support patients who choose to use alternative treatments. These studies would build on the current research and offer deeper insights into the multifaceted role of herbal remedies in cancer care.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the subjective experiences of individuals using herbal remedies in the treatment of cancer, addressing the gap in understanding the emotional and psychological impacts of these alternative therapies. The findings revealed that while participants expressed skepticism about the physical effectiveness of herbal remedies, they valued the emotional comfort, sense of control, and hope these treatments provided. These insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of cancer care, emphasizing the importance of considering patients' psychological and emotional well-being alongside clinical outcomes. This research addresses the limitations of previous studies that focused solely on clinical efficacy, highlighting the need to integrate emotional support in cancer treatment. Future studies could explore the cultural variations in the use of herbal remedies and investigate the long-term impact of these treatments on patients' emotional health. Expanding this research could lead to more comprehensive cancer care models that incorporate both conventional and alternative therapies.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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