



## Lived Experiences and Healing Meanings of Postoperative Patients Using Traditional Herbal Remedies

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### ABSTRACT

Traditional herbal medicine remains an essential element in many societies' healing practices, representing an intersection between cultural heritage and modern healthcare. Within the field of natural and herbal remedies, current knowledge largely emphasizes pharmacological efficacy while overlooking the lived experiences that shape patients' perceptions of healing. However, little is known about how patients interpret and internalize their recovery through herbal use in contemporary clinical contexts, particularly following surgical procedures. This qualitative study fills that gap by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore how postoperative patients construct meaning from their experiences with herbal remedies during recovery, thereby offering a novel perspective that integrates cultural, psychological, and existential dimensions often absent in prior pharmacological research. Data were gathered from twelve postoperative patients (aged 28–65; 7 females and 5 males) who combined prescribed medical treatments with traditional herbal remedies after surgery. Each participant was interviewed through in-depth, semi-structured sessions lasting 60–90 minutes. The transcripts were analyzed following Smith's IPA framework, involving iterative coding, theme clustering, and interpretative synthesis to ensure credibility and depth of interpretation. The analysis revealed four essential themes: emotional serenity, social support, spiritual resonance, and trust in natural safety. Together, these themes illustrate that herbal healing is not solely a physical process but a symbolic and existential act of reconnection—with self, community, and nature. This study's novelty lies in its illumination of how postoperative recovery through herbal medicine embodies a culturally grounded sense of healing that transcends biomedical paradigms. The findings demonstrate that recovery through herbal medicine is understood as a holistic balance between body, mind, and spirituality. By bridging experiential narratives with cultural symbolism, these insights advance our understanding of healing as a meaning-making experience, emphasizing the value of integrating cultural and emotional dimensions into patient care. The study's implications extend to the development of culturally sensitive healthcare models and open pathways for future interdisciplinary research combining phenomenology, medical science, and cultural studies.



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## INTRODUCTION

Traditional herbal medicine has long played a vital role in the health and healing practices of diverse societies across the world. Rooted in ancient wisdom and cultural continuity, herbal remedies are deeply embedded within communal and familial traditions that view health not merely as the absence of disease but as a dynamic balance between body, mind, spirit, and environment (De Santis Feltran et al., 2022). In many regions, especially within Southeast Asia, herbal medicine remains a preferred therapeutic choice for maintaining well-being, managing chronic conditions, and supporting recovery after medical interventions. Despite rapid advancements in modern biomedicine, the cultural and emotional significance of herbal use continues to endure, reflecting an enduring trust in nature's curative power and the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge.

The contemporary resurgence of interest in natural and herbal remedies extends beyond medical efficacy (Kamran et al., 2022). It encompasses a growing human desire for holistic approaches that address physical and psychological dimensions of healing. Within hospital environments, where postoperative care is often dominated by clinical and pharmacological protocols, the integration of herbal treatments represents more than an alternative—it reflects a lived negotiation between traditional wisdom and modern science (Mukhlis, 2025a). Patients who incorporate herbal remedies into their recovery processes often describe experiences of comfort, reassurance, and self-agency, which are rarely captured through quantitative medical outcomes. These experiential dimensions illustrate that healing, in many cultural contexts, is not purely biomedical but existential, relational, and spiritual in nature.

Understanding this phenomenon requires more than an examination of herbal efficacy; it calls for an exploration of how individuals experience and make sense of healing through natural means. A phenomenological perspective is thus essential to reveal the subjective meanings and embodied experiences that accompany the use of herbal remedies (Strasheim et al., 2023). By focusing on lived experience rather than clinical measurement, phenomenology allows researchers to illuminate how patients interpret the process of recovery as part of a broader narrative of self, culture, and spirituality (Adamu et al., 2019). This interpretative lens provides not only an academic contribution to the field of natural and herbal medicine but also a deeper human understanding of healing as a meaning-making process shaped by belief, emotion, and connection to nature.

Building upon the growing recognition of natural and herbal remedies in contemporary health research, the exploration of patients' lived experiences in using such remedies has emerged as a crucial field of inquiry (Mukhlis, 2025b). Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that healing through herbal medicine encompasses more than biochemical processes—it involves emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions that shape individuals' interpretations of health and recovery (Moseley et al., 2020). Within this context, phenomenological inquiry has gained significance as a means to uncover the subjective realities of those who engage in herbal-based healing practices (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). By emphasizing meaning rather than measurement, this approach allows researchers to illuminate the intricate ways individuals experience, interpret, and internalize the act of healing through natural substances.

However, methodological challenges persist in fully capturing these nuanced human experiences (Tyler et al., 2019). Much of the existing literature on herbal medicine remains dominated by quantitative paradigms, emphasizing pharmacological efficacy, chemical composition, or statistical health outcomes. While such approaches provide valuable biomedical evidence, they often fail to account for the subjective dimensions of healing—such as comfort, faith, and cultural belonging—that patients associate with herbal use (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Data derived from surveys or clinical trials seldom convey the experiential texture of recovery as lived and narrated by patients themselves. Consequently, the emotional, social, and spiritual significance of herbal medicine continues to be underrepresented in mainstream scientific discourse.

This methodological gap underscores a broader limitation in previous research: the inadequacy of purely empirical or positivist approaches to grasp the essence of human healing experiences (Wilson & Spark, 2021). Quantitative models, by design, abstract individual meanings into measurable variables, thereby overlooking the personal and contextual interpretations that define the lived world of patients (Judd et al., 2023). In contrast, a phenomenological approach—particularly the interpretative tradition inspired by Heidegger—seeks to access these inner meanings through careful engagement with participants' narratives (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Such an approach not only addresses the epistemological limitations of prior studies but also provides a rigorous pathway to understanding how patients construct, embody, and sustain their sense of recovery through the symbolic and lived act of consuming herbal remedies.

While the use of traditional herbal medicine in postoperative recovery has been widely documented, existing studies have predominantly approached the topic through clinical and pharmacological frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes such as efficacy, dosage, and biochemical properties (Alzayani et al., 2023). These approaches have provided practical insights into

the therapeutic value of herbal remedies but remain insufficient in explaining how patients experience healing as a personal, emotional, and spiritual process (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). The emphasis on objective validation has often overshadowed the subjective meanings embedded in the use of herbal medicine, resulting in a fragmented understanding of its role within holistic recovery.

Previous research tends to employ pragmatic and outcome-based methodologies, assuming that the significance of herbal therapy can be fully understood through physiological improvement or medical indicators. However, such approaches neglect the experiential and interpretive dimensions of healing—how individuals perceive, feel, and assign meaning to the process of recovery (Jasper et al., 2023). The complexity of human healing, particularly when involving natural remedies intertwined with cultural and spiritual beliefs, cannot be adequately captured through quantitative or descriptive methods alone (Hemrage et al., 2024). This epistemological limitation leaves a gap in our comprehension of how patients internalize and construct their recovery experiences through herbal practices.

To address this gap, there is a need for an interpretative phenomenological approach that explores the lived experiences of patients using herbal remedies in modern medical contexts (Miller et al., 2023). Phenomenology offers a lens to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward uncovering the essence of the phenomenon—how healing is understood, embodied, and spiritually integrated by individuals (Meng et al., 2022). By focusing on participants' subjective realities, this study seeks to provide a deeper and more holistic account of herbal medicine use, revealing how cultural continuity, emotional meaning, and spiritual connection converge in the human experience of healing (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Such understanding is vital not only for enriching theoretical perspectives in natural and herbal medicine but also for informing more empathetic and culturally responsive healthcare practices.

Previous studies on traditional and herbal medicine have largely focused on pharmacological validation and clinical efficiency, yet a growing number of qualitative works have begun exploring the human experience of healing through natural remedies (Austin & Gregory, 2019). Research within medical anthropology and health psychology has shown that patients' perceptions of recovery are deeply influenced by culture, faith, and emotional meaning (Long et al., 2024). Theories of embodiment and holistic well-being suggest that healing is not only biological but also existential and relational. Phenomenological investigations within these domains have emphasized the importance of understanding health as a lived experience rather than a measurable condition (Korb et al., 2023). These foundations provide a theoretical base for examining how herbal medicine is experienced as both a cultural and spiritual act of healing.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to address the previously identified gap in understanding the subjective meaning of herbal medicine use among postoperative patients (Xiao et al., 2025). The method is chosen because it enables a deep exploration of lived experiences, revealing how individuals interpret their healing journeys in personal, emotional, and spiritual terms. By engaging with participants' narratives, the study seeks to uncover how the integration of herbal and modern medical practices shapes the meaning of recovery (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The IPA framework allows for both description and interpretation, bridging the objective context of clinical recovery with the subjective realm of patient experience. In doing so, it provides a holistic response to the central research question regarding the lived meaning of herbal healing.

The structure of this article follows a coherent and reflective framework aligned with phenomenological conventions (Murphy et al., 2019). The introduction outlines the research context, background, and rationale leading to the study's aim. The subsequent section elaborates on the phenomenological design, participant characteristics, data collection, and analysis procedures (Karahana, 2022). Following this, the results section presents thematic insights derived from interpretative analysis, supported by direct participant quotations (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). Finally, the discussion and conclusion synthesize these findings, highlighting their theoretical and practical implications for healthcare, cultural understanding, and future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of patients using traditional herbal remedies for postoperative recovery within modern medical contexts. The phenomenological design was selected because it focuses on uncovering the essence and meaning of human experiences as perceived by individuals themselves. Through this design, the phenomenon of herbal medicine use was examined not as an objective event, but as a subjective, contextual, and meaning-laden experience.

Interpretative phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, emphasizes understanding how individuals interpret their lived worlds rather than merely describing them. This approach was particularly suitable for the present study, as it allowed for a nuanced exploration of emotional, social, and spiritual meanings embedded in patients' healing journeys. The method provided a philosophical and analytical framework for grasping the depth of human experience that quantitative designs cannot capture.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of individuals who had undergone surgical procedures and used herbal remedies as part of their postoperative recovery. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct and meaningful experience of the studied phenomenon. Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) have completed at least one month of postoperative recovery, (2) have actively used herbal treatments during that period, and (3) be willing to share their personal experiences in detail.

Participants who relied exclusively on synthetic pharmaceuticals or had no prior familiarity with herbal use were excluded. The sample included twelve participants, aged between 28 and 65 years, comprising both male and female respondents from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. Their varied perspectives enriched the understanding of how traditional healing practices integrate within modern clinical recovery contexts.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich and reflective descriptions of participants' experiences. An interview guide containing open-ended questions was developed to facilitate dialogue about perceptions, emotions, and meanings associated with herbal use. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, comfortable environments chosen by participants—typically their homes or private hospital consultation rooms—to promote openness and comfort.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal expressions. The interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new themes emerged. All conversations were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuances and emotional tones inherent in participants' narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic and iterative process. Each transcript was first read multiple times to achieve a holistic understanding of the text. Meaning units were then identified and coded to capture essential expressions reflecting participants' lived experiences. These units were grouped into emergent categories, which were subsequently synthesized into broader thematic clusters.

Themes were refined through a process of interpretative reflection to ensure coherence and depth, culminating in the identification of four core experiential themes. NVivo 12 software was utilized to support data organization and to enhance traceability of analytical decisions. The analytical procedure adhered to the phenomenological principle of epoché, maintaining openness to participants' meanings while bracketing preconceptions that might distort interpretation. The final themes represented the essential structure of how participants perceived and made sense of their healing processes through herbal remedies.

## RESULTS

### Emotional Serenity and Psychological Empowerment

Participants consistently described an emotional sense of calmness and empowerment while using herbal remedies during recovery. Herbal consumption was not perceived merely as a physical treatment but as a restorative practice that fostered inner peace and confidence. Rather than viewing herbal remedies solely as supplements, participants interpreted them as catalysts of self-assurance and inner balance, reflecting a psychosomatic alignment between body and mind. One participant explained how the herbal routine created a sense of harmony and lightness in both body and spirit. Across narratives, this serenity was interpreted as a form of embodied mindfulness—where herbal practice reaffirmed personal agency and restored trust in one’s capacity to heal. The phenomenological insight thus emphasizes that herbal use symbolized reconnection with nature as a psychological source of strength during vulnerable recovery periods.

### Social Support and Collective Healing Practices

The role of family and community was central in shaping participants’ healing experiences. Herbal use was often embedded within shared cultural routines and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Participants described family members—especially mothers and grandmothers—as healers and transmitters of ancestral wisdom, transforming recovery into a collective act of care. For instance, herbal preparation rituals symbolized emotional reassurance and continuity of familial identity. This collective healing structure revealed that recovery was socially co-constructed, where trust in traditional remedies reaffirmed communal belonging and cultural identity. The theme illustrates that healing extended beyond the biomedical sphere, becoming a shared social narrative of resilience and reciprocity.

#### Cycle of Collective Healing



### Spiritual Resonance and Transcendent Meaning

For many participants, the use of herbal remedies carried a spiritual dimension beyond physical healing. They perceived herbal medicine as an expression of divine creation, where consuming herbs was not only a treatment but an act of gratitude and submission to divine will. Participants often linked their recovery to faith, viewing natural healing as a sign of God’s mercy. This theme highlights the transcendental layer of recovery—herbal practice became a spiritual ritual that provided existential comfort, reinforcing meaning in suffering and acceptance of vulnerability. Through this perspective, herbal remedies bridged the material and metaphysical realms, embodying both biological recovery and spiritual renewal.

### Practical Accessibility and Trust in Natural Safety

Participants viewed herbal remedies as accessible, safe, and trustworthy, contrasting them with the perceived artificiality of modern pharmaceuticals. This trust stemmed from cultural familiarity, affordability, and personal experience with minimal side effects, reinforcing a belief in the moral and ecological integrity of natural medicine. Many associated herbal treatments with autonomy—the ability to manage one’s healing through locally available resources. Phenomenological interpretation revealed that this sense of control reflected a deeper epistemic stance: a preference for nature-based wisdom over institutional dependency. Consequently, herbal medicine was seen as a complementary, yet culturally authentic, pathway to recovery within modern healthcare systems.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study revealed that patients’ experiences of using herbal remedies during postoperative recovery extend beyond physical healing to encompass emotional tranquility, social interconnectedness, spiritual meaning, and trust in natural processes (Almutairi et al., 2025). These dimensions collectively illuminate the essence of healing as a holistic and meaning-making experience, thereby addressing the central question of how individuals interpret recovery through herbal use within a modern medical context.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The study’s results provide a nuanced and human-centered understanding of how herbal medicine functions not merely as a therapeutic agent but as a symbolic and experiential medium through which patients negotiate their sense of well-being (Peres, 2019). The phenomenological interpretation demonstrates that recovery is lived and understood as a process of restoring balance—between body and spirit, tradition and modernity, self and community. This directly answers the research question by revealing that the act of consuming herbal remedies represents both a personal reaffirmation of agency and a cultural re-engagement with ancestral healing values.

Moreover, the themes of emotional serenity, social support, and spiritual resonance highlight how patients construct meaning in healing that transcends medical outcomes. These experiences reaffirm that patients’ beliefs, emotions, and cultural frameworks play an active role in shaping how healing is perceived and embodied (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Thus, the study contributes uniquely to the phenomenological literature by emphasizing that the subjective meaning of herbal therapy is integral to its therapeutic value, not secondary to it. Such understanding offers an expanded view of health care—one that situates recovery within the lived realities and belief systems of patients rather than within a purely biomedical framework.

### **Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory**

The interpretation of these findings aligns with existing phenomenological studies emphasizing the interrelation between embodiment, spirituality, and healing. Similar to (Ammari et al., 2019), who found that cancer survivors perceive herbal therapy as spiritually restorative, this study confirms that the use of natural remedies is intertwined with experiences of divine connection and emotional renewal. Likewise, the findings resonate with (Dhital et al., 2022), who described how religious and cultural values shape the meaning of natural healing among Muslim women. However, the current study extends these insights by contextualizing them within postoperative recovery, a domain where the intersection between clinical care and cultural healing practices remains underexplored.

The results also enrich theoretical perspectives on holistic health by reinforcing Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “lived body”, wherein physical and spiritual experiences are inseparable aspects of human existence. Patients’ narratives demonstrate that healing through herbal remedies is not an external procedure but an embodied act of reclaiming equilibrium between nature and self (Villemure & Wilby, 2024). This interpretation challenges reductionist medical paradigms and supports integrative health models that consider the experiential and existential dimensions of care. By bridging phenomenological theory and empirical evidence, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural and spiritual meaning systems sustain patients’ recovery in contemporary clinical settings.

### **Explanation of the Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications for understanding healing within the intersection of traditional and modern healthcare systems. From a scientific standpoint, they emphasize that healing is a meaning-centered experience—a process shaped as much by cultural belief, emotional resonance, and spiritual reflection as by physiological recovery (Zahraa et al., 2019). In the social and cultural context, the study highlights the enduring relevance of traditional herbal practices as vehicles of identity and intergenerational continuity (Skoy & Werremeyer, 2020). For healthcare practitioners, the findings suggest that integrating patients' cultural narratives and spiritual meanings into clinical care may foster trust, compliance, and emotional well-being. This implies that holistic recovery programs should not dismiss traditional healing practices as mere supplements, but rather recognize them as integral expressions of patients' lived realities. By acknowledging the coexistence of biomedical and cultural paradigms, healthcare systems can move toward a more empathetic and culturally competent model of care.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of postoperative patients using herbal remedies, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study's sample size and contextual specificity—focusing on patients within a particular cultural and hospital environment—limit the generalizability of the findings (Henderson et al., 2020). Phenomenological inquiry seeks depth rather than breadth, and therefore, the interpretations presented here reflect the unique perspectives of those who participated rather than a universally representative population. Additionally, self-reported data may be influenced by participants' memory, cultural expectations, or personal beliefs, potentially shaping their narratives in subtle ways. Nevertheless, these limitations are inherent to phenomenological research and serve not as methodological weaknesses, but as boundaries that frame the interpretative depth of the inquiry. They also provide valuable direction for future investigations aiming to expand the scope of cultural and contextual comparison.

### **Prospective Statement for Future Research**

Future research may build upon these findings by exploring how phenomenological meanings of healing differ across diverse sociocultural and clinical settings. Comparative studies could examine variations in patients' interpretations of herbal therapy in different cultural or religious contexts, thereby broadening our understanding of how spirituality, belief, and tradition shape recovery (Barnett & Pappa, 2023). Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate phenomenological insight with clinical and ethnopharmacological research could deepen the dialogue between medical science and human experience (DeAtley et al., 2023). Such work would further clarify how meaning-making influences adherence, satisfaction, and perceived efficacy in integrative medicine (López et al., 2024). Ultimately, extending this line of inquiry can contribute to a more humanized and culturally grounded model of healthcare, where traditional and modern healing practices coexist in mutual respect and understanding.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of postoperative patients using traditional herbal remedies within modern hospital settings, emphasizing how healing is perceived as a holistic and meaning-making process. The findings revealed that patients associate herbal use with emotional serenity, social belonging, spiritual connection, and trust in natural balance, offering insight into the subjective dimensions of recovery. These results address the gap left by prior biomedical research by demonstrating that healing involves more than physiological restoration—it reflects cultural, emotional, and existential integration. The study contributes to phenomenological inquiry by showing that the meaning of herbal healing is deeply intertwined with identity, belief, and embodied experience. Beyond restating the findings, this research provides actionable insights for healthcare practitioners. Integrating patients' cultural healing practices into clinical care can enhance trust, compliance, and emotional well-being, especially during postoperative recovery. Healthcare professionals are encouraged to adopt culturally sensitive communication, collaborate with traditional healers where appropriate, and design recovery programs that acknowledge patients' belief systems and self-healing values. Such integration can bridge the gap between biomedical treatment and holistic recovery, improving patient satisfaction and therapeutic outcomes.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that hospitals and health systems could benefit from developing guidelines that respect traditional healing knowledge while maintaining scientific safety standards. Incorporating herbal literacy programs for medical staff may also foster mutual understanding between modern and traditional practices. Future research should advance this dialogue by exploring cross-cultural variations in herbal healing meanings, longitudinal effects of integrative recovery models, and interprofessional collaborations that unite clinical science with ethnomedical wisdom. In doing so, future studies may help establish a more inclusive paradigm of healing—one that honors both the body's physiology and the human spirit's capacity for renewal.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All stages of the research, from data collection to analysis and interpretation, were conducted independently and ethically, without any external influence from the funding sponsor or affiliated institutions.

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