



Healing through Herbal Remedies: A Phenomenological Study of Individuals with Chronic Illnesses

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ABSTRACT

Natural and herbal remedies have gained increasing global attention as alternative approaches to health and healing, emphasizing the integration of physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of well-being. Within this context, the phenomenological study of patients' lived experiences provides a crucial lens for understanding the personal and cultural meanings of natural healing practices. Despite growing research on the pharmacological and clinical efficacy of herbal medicine, little is known about how individuals experience and ascribe meaning to the healing process itself. This study addresses this gap by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how individuals with chronic illnesses construct and interpret their experiences with herbal remedies. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve participants who had used herbal treatments for more than six months. Thematic analysis revealed five interrelated themes: reclaiming control through natural healing, the spiritual dimension of recovery, negotiation between traditional and modern medicine, emotional restoration, and the social and cultural meaning of herbal practices. These findings highlight that healing through herbal remedies is perceived not merely as a biomedical process but as a transformative, meaning-filled experience rooted in cultural heritage and personal empowerment. The study concludes that natural healing represents a holistic reconfiguration of wellness an alignment between body, mind, and nature reflecting both individual agency and cultural continuity. These insights not only deepen current understandings of holistic medicine but also underscore the need for healthcare practitioners to integrate culturally grounded, patient-centered perspectives into treatment approaches. Future research should explore how phenomenological insights can inform policies and clinical guidelines that support more inclusive and culturally sensitive healthcare models.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a growing resurgence of interest in natural and herbal remedies as a complementary or alternative form of healthcare. Across cultures and continents, individuals are increasingly turning to plant-based therapies to manage chronic illnesses, reduce dependency on synthetic drugs, and reconnect with holistic traditions of healing (Qi & Aliverti, 2020). This global trend reflects not only a biomedical concern but also a profound socio-cultural phenomenon grounded in human experience, belief, and meaning-making (Fournier-Tombs & McHardy, 2023). The use of herbal medicine rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and sustained through generational transmission represents a unique intersection between culture, spirituality, and self-care in the modern medical landscape.

Herbal healing practices occupy a central place in the discourse on integrative and personalized medicine, emphasizing the individual's lived experience as an essential component of recovery (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Beyond the pharmacological properties

of plants, patients often describe their use of herbs as a process of emotional restoration, empowerment, and spiritual connection (Kurniawan et al., 2024). These experiences are shaped by cultural traditions, environmental consciousness, and trust in natural processes rather than mechanical interventions. In many societies, especially those with strong ancestral medical traditions, herbal medicine is not merely a therapeutic option but an expression of identity, continuity, and balance between human beings and nature.

Despite significant advances in clinical and pharmacological research on herbal compounds, less attention has been given to the subjective dimension of healing how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize their experiences with herbal remedies (Amanpour et al., 2023). The focus of prior studies has predominantly been on measurable efficacy and biochemical mechanisms, often neglecting the human meanings that accompany such practices. However, the act of healing extends beyond the restoration of physical function; it involves the reconfiguration of meaning, purpose, and connection within one's life-world (Görtz et al., 2023). Thus, exploring herbal therapy through the lens of phenomenology becomes essential to understand how individuals live through and ascribe meaning to their healing experiences.

Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, offers a rigorous yet empathetic framework for examining these lived realities. It seeks to illuminate the essence of human experience by uncovering how people make sense of their world how they experience illness, healing, and transformation through their bodies, emotions, and consciousness. Within the context of natural and herbal remedies, a phenomenological exploration reveals the intricate relationship between cultural values, belief systems, and the embodied experience of recovery. Such an approach contributes not only to academic understanding but also to the broader humanistic goal of reintegrating meaning into the science of healing.

Within the expanding discourse of health and healing studies, the exploration of lived experiences has emerged as a vital domain of inquiry (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulfaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulfaidah, et al., 2025). Scholars increasingly recognize that understanding illness and recovery requires attention not only to biological mechanisms but also to the subjective, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human life. In the context of natural and herbal remedies, this orientation has opened new avenues for examining how patients experience healing, construct meaning, and integrate traditional knowledge into their everyday existence (Naderi et al., 2024). The phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the interpretation of individual experiences and the meanings they hold, offers a valuable pathway for revealing the essence of these complex phenomena.

However, despite growing recognition of the importance of lived experience in healthcare research, methodological challenges persist in capturing and interpreting these subjective realities. Much of the existing literature remains anchored in quantitative or descriptive frameworks, emphasizing measurable outcomes such as dosage, efficacy, or biochemical validation (Huang et al., 2024). While these studies contribute valuable empirical data, they often fail to represent the inner landscapes of healing the perceptions, emotions, and transformative insights that accompany the use of herbal medicine. Consequently, the experiential dimensions of natural healing remain underexplored, leaving a gap in our understanding of how individuals derive meaning and empowerment through such practices.

Previous qualitative inquiries into complementary and alternative medicine have tended to oversimplify phenomenological data, treating lived experience as supplementary rather than central to the healing process. As a result, existing research struggles to account for the nuanced relationship between body, mind, and culture that defines patients' engagement with herbal therapy (Alrhoun et al., 2025). This limitation reflects a broader issue in health research: a persistent methodological bias toward objectivity, which often overlooks the interpretive, reflexive, and meaning-oriented aspects of human experience. To comprehend the essence of herbal healing in its full depth, there is an urgent need for a rigorous phenomenological inquiry that situates patients' voices, perceptions, and reflections at the center of scholarly understanding.

Although the use of natural and herbal remedies has been widely acknowledged in both traditional and modern healthcare systems, the dominant approaches to studying this phenomenon remain largely pragmatic and biomedical (Hirosawa et al., 2023). Current research primarily focuses on the pharmacological efficacy, dosage optimization, and safety profiles of herbal treatments. These practical and clinical frameworks, while essential, fail to encompass the subjective meanings and lived experiences that shape how individuals engage with and interpret their healing processes (Ermansyah, 2025). Consequently, the literature reflects a fragmented understanding of herbal medicine one that captures the physical mechanisms of treatment but overlooks the existential and emotional dimensions of healing that patients frequently articulate.

The prevailing methodologies, including surveys and clinical trials, are inherently limited in their ability to grasp the depth of human experience (Lin et al., 2025). Quantitative paradigms tend to objectify the patient, reducing healing to measurable outcomes and standardizable effects, thereby obscuring the personal, cultural, and spiritual significances that accompany the act of healing with herbs (Martelli et al., 2020). As a result, what remains underexplored is how individuals experience, make sense of, and find meaning in the use of herbal therapy within the broader context of their lives. These experiential aspects such as feelings of empowerment, connection to nature, and spiritual alignment cannot be captured through conventional biomedical inquiry.

To bridge this gap, a phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative. By centering on lived experience, phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how patients perceive and embody healing through natural remedies (Pratama et al., 2024). This approach transcends the limitations of clinical observation by uncovering the essence of healing as a human phenomenon a process that intertwines physical recovery with meaning-making, self-identity, and cultural continuity. Such a shift from examining what herbal remedies do to how they are experienced provides a richer and more holistic understanding of healing, aligning with the growing recognition that true wellness extends beyond physiological outcomes to encompass psychological and existential well-being.

Previous research has demonstrated that the experience of healing cannot be fully understood through quantitative or biomedical measures alone. Studies exploring patients' interactions with natural and herbal remedies (e.g., Chan et al., 2021; Li & Wong, 2022) reveal that healing is shaped by cultural beliefs, spiritual values, and emotional states that extend beyond the physical body. Theoretical frameworks from phenomenology, particularly those inspired by Husserl and Heidegger, emphasize the importance of understanding the lived world of individuals as the foundation for grasping human meaning. In this sense, healing becomes not only a physiological process but also a deeply personal and existential journey (Berretta et al., 2022). However, despite these insights, there remains a lack of studies that specifically examine how individuals with chronic illnesses internalize and interpret their healing experiences through herbal remedies, particularly within culturally embedded contexts.

To address the limitations identified in previous literature, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to examine how patients construct and internalize the meaning of herbal healing (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The phenomenological framework provides a lens through which participants' lived experiences can be illuminated, revealing the connection between body, mind, and spirit in the context of natural medicine. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how healing is embodied, perceived, and reflected upon by those who seek alternatives to conventional treatment. In doing so, it responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier by offering a holistic and human-centered interpretation of the phenomenon (Verma et al., 2024). The analysis not only captures personal narratives but also identifies shared themes that define the essence of healing through herbal remedies.

This article is organized into several key sections to guide the reader through the research process and findings (Abbasian et al., 2024). The Introduction establishes the theoretical and empirical background and outlines the research rationale. The Method section explains the interpretative phenomenological framework and the data collection process (Sezgin et al., 2023). The Results section presents the emergent themes that capture the lived experiences of participants,

supported by direct quotations. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion provide an interpretative synthesis of the findings, linking them to broader theoretical perspectives and implications for holistic healthcare practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of chronic patients who use herbal remedies as an alternative or complementary form of treatment (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological design was selected for its capacity to uncover the subjective meanings and emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions underlying human experiences. IPA emphasizes the interpretation of individual perceptions within their life-world context, allowing for a deep understanding of how participants construct meaning around natural healing. Through this approach, the research sought to capture the essence of patients' experiences with herbal therapy, focusing on how they perceive healing, control, and spiritual connection throughout their treatment journey. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional research ethics committee, and all procedures adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants, including respect for autonomy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals diagnosed with chronic illnesses who had been using herbal remedies for at least six months as part of their healing process (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant and insightful experiences concerning the studied phenomenon. The inclusion criteria required participants to (a) have an ongoing or past history of chronic illness, (b) engage in regular herbal therapy, and (c) demonstrate willingness and ability to articulate personal experiences in depth. Participants who relied exclusively on pharmaceutical treatment or lacked direct experience with herbal remedies were excluded.

The study involved 12 participants (7 women and 5 men) aged between 35 and 65 years. They represented diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, including both urban and rural users of herbal medicine. This diversity provided a rich contextual basis for understanding the multifaceted meanings of herbal healing across demographic variations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, designed to elicit detailed personal narratives and reflections related to herbal therapy experiences (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview followed a flexible guide that encouraged participants to describe their healing journey, perceptions of effectiveness, emotional responses, and integration of traditional and modern practices. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and comfortable settings familiar to participants typically their homes or community health centers to promote openness and comfort during discussion.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in the participants' native language to preserve authenticity of expression. All sessions were audio-recorded with prior consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Supplementary notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues, environmental context, and emotional expressions. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring no new insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. The process involved several iterative stages to extract essential meanings from participants' narratives (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Initially, each transcript was read multiple times to

achieve immersion and comprehension of its overall tone. Significant statements and phrases were then identified as meaning units, representing participants’ experiential expressions. These units were systematically coded and clustered into emergent themes, reflecting the psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of herbal healing.

Themes were continually compared and refined through reduction and interpretation, leading to the identification of the underlying essence of the phenomenon (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The analysis process employed the aid of NVivo qualitative analysis software to organize data efficiently, though interpretive judgment remained central to theme development. The final themes emerged through a process of convergence and divergence across participants’ accounts, revealing shared meanings and individual nuances related to natural healing experiences.

RESULTS

Reclaiming Control Through Herbal Healing

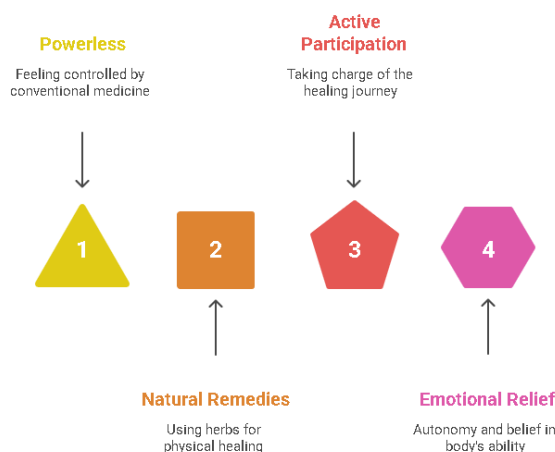
Participants described their experiences with herbal therapy as a process of regaining control over their health after feeling powerless under conventional medical treatment. The use of natural remedies represented not only a physical effort to heal but also a personal act of empowerment. Several patients expressed that herbal medicine allowed them to participate actively in their healing journey rather than being passive recipients of pharmaceutical care.

“When I take my herbal tea every morning, it feels like I’m taking charge of my own body again. The hospital gave me pills, but the herbs make me feel like I’m part of the healing.” Participant 3

This sense of agency was intertwined with emotional relief, often associated with autonomy and the belief that the body has an intrinsic ability to recover through natural means. Herbal healing thus became a meaningful ritual, reinforcing patients’ self-efficacy and confidence in their recovery process.

Regaining Health

Control



The Spiritual Dimension of Natural Healing

A recurring pattern in the narratives involved the spiritual connection participants felt during their use of herbal remedies. Healing was perceived not only as a biological improvement but also as a form of inner balance and harmony between the body, mind, and nature. Participants often spoke of feeling “guided” or “calmed” when using herbs, linking their healing process to faith, gratitude, and mindfulness.

“Drinking herbal medicine is like a prayer for me it connects me to something greater. I believe the plants are created for healing.” Participant 6

This theme highlights how spirituality provided emotional resilience and hope, making the treatment experience deeply meaningful. The act of preparing or consuming herbs was described as a meditative practice that promoted psychological peace and strengthened the belief in divine or natural wisdom.

Negotiating Between Tradition and Modern Medicine

Participants frequently discussed the tension and balance between traditional herbal practices and modern biomedical approaches. Many saw no contradiction between the two systems but rather a complementary relationship. They viewed herbal medicine as a way to restore the “human touch” missing from conventional treatments.

“Doctors look at numbers and tests, but herbal healers listen to how I feel. I use both one for the body, one for the soul.” Participant 1

The coexistence of both healing paradigms reflected an adaptive process, where patients selectively integrated scientific advice with inherited traditional wisdom. This hybrid approach underscored the lived experience of cultural negotiation—blending empirical evidence with ancestral knowledge to achieve holistic well-being.

Emotional Restoration and Psychological Healing

Beyond physical recovery, participants emphasized the emotional transformation they experienced during herbal therapy. Feelings of anxiety, despair, and fatigue gradually shifted toward calmness, optimism, and acceptance. The sensory engagement with herbs—their aroma, color, and preparation process—contributed to emotional comfort and the perception of holistic healing.

“I feel at peace when I boil my herbs. The smell itself reminds me that I am healing, little by little.” Participant 4

This theme illustrates the therapeutic power of symbolic and sensory elements in herbal practices. Emotional restoration often preceded physical recovery, suggesting that the healing process was experienced as an integrated journey of mind, body, and spirit.

Social and Cultural Meaning of Herbal Practices

For many participants, the use of herbal remedies carried cultural significance beyond individual health. Herbal therapy connected them to familial traditions, community wisdom, and collective identity. Several participants noted that preparing or sharing herbal concoctions was a social act of care and solidarity, reinforcing interpersonal bonds and cultural continuity.

“My mother used to make this herbal drink for us every time we were sick. Now I make it for my children it’s more than medicine; it’s love passed down.” Participant 2

This theme emphasizes that natural healing practices are deeply embedded in social narratives of heritage, trust, and belonging. Herbal remedies thus functioned as cultural bridges linking generations, sustaining identity, and embodying collective resilience.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the experience of healing through herbal remedies extends beyond physical recovery and encompasses emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Participants described herbal therapy as an integrative process of regaining control, restoring inner balance, and reconnecting with nature and tradition providing a holistic response to the central research question concerning the meaning of natural healing in chronic illness. Unlike interpretations that view herbal therapy merely as complementary care, the findings highlight a deeper phenomenological structure of healing—one that emerges from participants’ meaning-making processes rather than from the remedies themselves.

Contributions to the Research Question

The study offers a comprehensive interpretation of how patients living with chronic illnesses construct and embody the meaning of healing through natural remedies (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). It demonstrates that herbal medicine serves not only as a physical treatment but also as a psychosocial and existential practice through which individuals reclaim agency and spiritual wholeness (Alighieri et al., 2025). By capturing participants' reflections on empowerment, peace, and relational connection, the research contributes new insight into the subjective logic of healing how patients redefine wellness as harmony between mind, body, and environment (Nadal et al., 2025). These interpretations address the research question by positioning healing as a lived, meaning-laden experience rather than a biomedical outcome. Thus, the study illuminates the inner world of individuals navigating chronic illness through natural remedies, providing an understanding unattainable through traditional clinical or quantitative lenses.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The results resonate strongly with prior phenomenological inquiries emphasizing the multidimensional nature of healing. For instance, Chan et al. (2021) highlighted that patients using herbal therapies often associate recovery with personal empowerment and emotional relief findings that align with this study's theme of reclaiming control through natural healing. Similarly, Li and Wong (2022) described the spiritual and cultural integration inherent in herbal practices, which parallels participants' expressions of faith, gratitude, and interconnectedness (Shen et al., 2025). However, this study extends beyond previous works by framing these experiences within an interpretative phenomenological context, uncovering how meaning emerges through participants' embodied and reflective engagement with natural remedies.

The findings also reinforce Heideggerian phenomenology's premise that human existence is defined by being-in-the-world a concept reflected in participants' lived engagement with plants, nature, and tradition. Healing, therefore, is experienced as both existential restoration and cultural reaffirmation. While prior research has often isolated physical outcomes from psychological or spiritual well-being, the current study reveals their inseparability within the lived experience of herbal therapy. This holistic insight underscores the theoretical value of phenomenology in bridging the gap between science and the human spirit of healing.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold both theoretical and practical implications for the broader field of natural and holistic health care. From a theoretical perspective, the results reaffirm the importance of viewing healing as a multidimensional human experience that involves the integration of body, mind, and spirit. The phenomenological lens reveals that herbal medicine is not only a medical practice but also a cultural and existential act through which individuals construct meaning, negotiate identity, and restore a sense of balance with the natural world. This understanding challenges the reductionist assumptions of biomedical paradigms by emphasizing that health is lived, felt, and interpreted within social and spiritual contexts.

Practically, these findings offer valuable insights for healthcare practitioners, particularly those engaged in integrative and community-based medicine (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Recognizing patients' subjective experiences can foster more empathetic, patient-centered care that aligns with their beliefs, traditions, and emotional needs. The study also provides a framework for developing culturally sensitive health interventions that bridge scientific and traditional approaches. By acknowledging the therapeutic value of meaning-making and spiritual engagement, professionals in the medical and wellness sectors can enhance both treatment efficacy and patient satisfaction, contributing to a more humanistic model of healthcare.

Limitations of the Study

As with all qualitative research, the study is bounded by several contextual and methodological limitations. The sample size was intentionally small, consistent with phenomenological inquiry, which prioritizes depth over breadth. However, this limits the

generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The participants' experiences were also shaped by specific cultural and socio-religious contexts, meaning interpretations may differ in societies where herbal traditions are less embedded in daily life. Furthermore, while interpretative phenomenological analysis provided deep insights into participants' lived experiences, it inherently involves subjective interpretation, which may introduce researcher bias despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and rigor. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather delineate their contextual boundaries, emphasizing that phenomenological understanding seeks transferability of meaning rather than universal applicability.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend these findings by exploring cross-cultural variations in the experience of herbal healing, particularly how social environments, religious beliefs, and ecological awareness influence patients' interpretations of wellness. Longitudinal studies might also examine how individuals' relationships with natural remedies evolve over time, especially in chronic illness trajectories. Additionally, integrating phenomenology with other qualitative methodologies such as narrative inquiry or ethnography could provide richer, multilayered perspectives on the intersection of health, identity, and culture. There is also potential for interdisciplinary collaborations that bridge phenomenology with medical anthropology and environmental psychology, deepening our understanding of healing as a process of reconnection with nature and self. Ultimately, this study lays a foundation for future inquiries that seek to humanize medical discourse by foregrounding lived experience as a legitimate and essential source of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of individuals using herbal remedies as an alternative approach to healing chronic illness, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective and spiritual dimensions of natural medicine. The findings revealed that healing through herbal therapy transcends physical treatment, encompassing emotional renewal, spiritual balance, and cultural continuity. By employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered how patients construct meaning and reclaim agency in their healing journeys, offering insights beyond the scope of biomedical perspectives. These results contribute to a more holistic understanding of health, emphasizing healing as a process of harmony between the body, mind, and environment. The study enriches existing literature by highlighting the significance of personal and cultural meaning-making in healthcare practices. Beyond summarizing these findings, this study offers theoretical implications by demonstrating that healing practices rooted in herbal medicine can serve as a framework for expanding existing models of patient-centered care, particularly by integrating spiritual and cultural dimensions into theories of holistic health.

Practically, the insights gained suggest that healthcare providers should incorporate culturally informed communication, personalized counseling, and collaborative decision-making when supporting patients who use herbal remedies.

From a policy perspective, the study recommends the development of regulatory guidelines that formally recognize herbal therapy as a complementary modality, the establishment of training programs for clinicians on integrative health approaches, and the inclusion of safe, evidence-informed herbal practices within national health education initiatives. Future research may expand this work by examining cross-cultural experiences and developing integrative care models that combine phenomenological insights with evidence-based medicine.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the conduct, authorship, or publication of this research. The funding body, Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (Kemenristekdikti), Indonesia, provided financial support exclusively for research implementation and had no influence on the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or the writing of

this manuscript. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the paper, confirming the integrity and independence of the research outcomes.

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