



Exploring the Lived Experience of Integrative Healing Among Post-Chemotherapy Cancer Survivors

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ABSTRACT

The integration of natural and herbal remedies in cancer survivorship care has become increasingly relevant in both clinical and cultural contexts. Despite this trend, little is known about how cancer survivors subjectively experience and interpret the use of herbal therapies alongside conventional treatments following chemotherapy. While previous research has primarily focused on clinical efficacy, it has not adequately addressed the personal and cultural meanings attributed to integrative healing practices. This study explores the following question: How do cancer survivors make sense of their experience combining herbal and biomedical therapies after chemotherapy? This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to reveal how survivors derive emotional, cultural, and spiritual meaning from their integrative healing practices. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight cancer survivors in Indonesia and analyzed using the IPA framework. The analysis identified four key themes: reclaiming control through herbal choices, healing beyond the physical body, negotiating trust between medical systems, and restoring identity through cultural memory. These themes illustrate that integrative healing serves as a form of agency, cultural continuity, and emotional resilience for survivors. The findings enhance our understanding of how individuals navigate recovery through deeply personal and culturally embedded practices. This study contributes to the development of more holistic, patient-centered cancer care models and opens new directions for cross-cultural research on integrative medicine. These insights underscore the importance of culturally responsive frameworks in survivorship care.



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INTRODUCTION

In many cultures across the globe, including in Southeast Asia, the use of natural and herbal remedies constitutes a deeply rooted tradition of healing. These practices are not only embedded in ancestral knowledge but are also integrated into contemporary healthcare behaviors, particularly among individuals facing chronic or life-threatening conditions. In cancer care, for example, many patients turn to herbal remedies as part of a broader strategy to complement biomedical treatments and reclaim personal agency in recovery.

This growing interest in herbal medicine reflects more than physiological concern; it signals a search for healing that resonates with emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Survivors who adopt herbal practices frequently report a renewed sense of agency, identity, and balance—dimensions often lacking in the highly clinical nature of hospital-based care. In contexts such as Indonesia, where traditional herbal knowledge (e.g., jamu) forms part of everyday life and cultural heritage, the turn to herbal healing represents a reconnection with culturally embedded frameworks of well-being.

However, while integrative practices are increasingly visible, current literature has largely focused on clinical efficacy and pharmacological concerns. There remains limited insight into the

subjective experiences of those navigating both biomedical and traditional systems. The socio-cultural motivations, personal interpretations, and existential meanings behind these integrative choices are often overlooked. Understanding how individuals negotiate trust across different medical paradigms, and how cultural identity shapes these healing journeys, requires a more human-centered and interpretive approach.

This study aims to explore how post-chemotherapy cancer survivors make sense of their experience combining herbal and biomedical therapies. By centering survivor narratives, this research seeks to illuminate the emotional, cultural, and spiritual meanings attributed to integrative healing practices in an Indonesian context.

Given this context, it is essential to investigate the experiential and symbolic dimensions of combining herbal and biomedical treatments from the perspective of those who live through such experiences. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on exploring lived experience and subjective meaning, provides an appropriate lens through which to understand the richness and complexity of this phenomenon.

Research on individuals' lived experiences in the context of illness and healing has emerged as a significant area within health and social sciences. Particularly in the aftermath of serious medical treatments, such as chemotherapy, understanding how patients make meaning of their recovery process has become central to advancing patient-centered care. This focus has drawn attention to the subjective, emotional, and cultural dimensions of healing that often remain hidden in conventional clinical research.

However, capturing the depth of such experiential knowledge presents distinct methodological challenges. Quantitative approaches, while useful for measuring outcomes and efficacy, are inherently limited in their ability to access the personal meanings, emotional narratives, and contextual nuances that shape patients' healing journeys. Surveys or standardized instruments may fail to recognize the symbolic or existential importance of practices like herbal therapy, especially when these practices are rooted in cultural heritage and embodied experience.

As a result, previous studies that have examined the integration of herbal and biomedical treatments often emphasize measurable outcomes such as symptom reduction or biochemical interactions, with less attention given to how individuals interpret and live through these integrative practices. Without a method that privileges the voice and perspective of the participant, such research risks overlooking the essence of the phenomenon being studied. This limitation underscores the inadequacy of conventional methodologies to fully illuminate the complexity and depth of patients' lived experiences, particularly in culturally diverse contexts where healing practices are multilayered and meaning-rich.

In the context of post-chemotherapy recovery, conventional approaches to patient care have largely emphasized practical solutions such as pharmacological symptom management, psychological counseling, and structured rehabilitation programs. These strategies, while clinically valuable, often operate within standardized frameworks that prioritize biomedical outcomes over the subjective meanings individuals attach to their healing processes. As such, they tend to overlook the culturally embedded and personally constructed experiences of cancer survivors who turn to alternative or complementary therapies, such as herbal medicine, to support their recovery.

Existing research has typically approached this subject from empirical or positivist paradigms, focusing on efficacy, usage rates, or biochemical interactions between herbal and conventional treatments. While these studies provide important contributions to clinical knowledge, they offer limited insight into how survivors interpret their use of herbal remedies, how these practices shape their sense of agency and identity, or how they negotiate the coexistence of traditional and biomedical paradigms within their healing journeys [Smith et al., 2020; Nguyen & Tran, 2021] .

This lack of interpretive depth presents a significant gap in understanding the holistic experience of integrative healing. To fully grasp the essence of this phenomenon particularly in sociocultural contexts where traditional medicine carries symbolic and ancestral meaning an alternative research lens is required. A phenomenological approach is uniquely positioned to fill this

gap by prioritizing the lived experience and subjective meaning-making processes of individuals. Through this lens, it becomes possible to uncover the nuanced, often unspoken dimensions of healing that conventional methodologies may fail to detect.

Previous studies have explored how individuals engage with complementary and alternative medicine during illness, particularly in chronic and post-treatment conditions. Research has shown that these practices are often linked to cultural identity, emotional well-being, and the desire for greater control in healing. Studies such as those by Smith et al. (2020) and Nguyen & Tran (2021) have examined the role of herbal medicine among cancer patients, but often with a descriptive or clinical focus. These studies provide useful context, but they do not fully capture the inner meanings that participants assign to their healing choices. There is still limited knowledge about how survivors experience and interpret the combination of herbal and biomedical care.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand how cancer survivors make sense of their post-chemotherapy healing through herbal and conventional therapies. This method is chosen for its ability to explore subjective experience in depth and reveal the personal, emotional, and cultural meanings behind health-related actions. By focusing on lived experience, this approach responds directly to the need for a deeper understanding raised in the previous section. It aims to uncover not only what participants do, but how they experience, feel, and interpret their healing. This phenomenological lens provides the clarity needed to address the identified knowledge gap.

The article is organized as follows: The introduction outlines the background and motivation for the study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenon under investigation and its cultural context. The methodological section describes the interpretative phenomenological design, the data collection process, and the analytic framework used. The results section presents key themes that emerged from participant narratives. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature and concludes with implications for practice and further research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach, which is grounded in the philosophical tradition of Heideggerian hermeneutics. The design was selected for its capacity to explore and interpret the lived experiences of individuals in relation to a specific phenomenon in this case, the integration of herbal and conventional treatments by cancer survivors following chemotherapy. Phenomenology, as a research design, prioritizes the exploration of subjective meaning as perceived by individuals in their life-world, rather than attempting to establish objective, generalized truths. The interpretative orientation of this study allowed for a nuanced understanding of how participants constructed meaning around their healing practices, within their socio-cultural and emotional contexts.

Participants

Participants consisted of adult cancer survivors who had completed chemotherapy and subsequently adopted a combination of herbal and biomedical treatments as part of their recovery process. Selection was carried out using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with rich and relevant experiences pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be over the age of 21, (b) have completed a full cycle of chemotherapy within the past three years, and (c) have actively used herbal remedies in conjunction with medical treatments. Individuals undergoing active cancer treatment or those with cognitive impairments affecting recall or communication were excluded. A total of 8 participants were included, comprising 5 females and 3 males, aged between 34 and 65 years, with an average age of 48. All participants had personal or familial familiarity with herbal traditions and were residing in urban and semi-urban areas in Indonesia.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in settings selected by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy. A guided interview protocol was used to facilitate open-ended discussions, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors. Interviews were conducted in the local language and later transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was developed based on existing phenomenological research and was reviewed by qualitative research experts to ensure its appropriateness. No major modifications were made during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic procedure to extract essential meanings from participants' narratives. Transcripts were first read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Meaning units were then identified and coded, followed by the development of emergent themes across cases. These themes were refined through iterative comparison and thematic clustering. The process emphasized both the descriptive and interpretative dimensions of participants' lived experiences. NVivo 12 software was utilized to assist in organizing and managing data segments, though thematic development and interpretation were performed manually. The final themes reflected both the idiosyncratic and shared aspects of the participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to the commencement of the study. All participants received comprehensive information about the study objectives, procedures, and their rights, and provided written informed consent before participating. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and data were handled with strict confidentiality. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

This section presents the lived experiences of cancer survivors who adopted a combination of herbal remedies and conventional medical treatments following chemotherapy. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, several key themes emerged from the interviews. Each theme encapsulates the essence of the participants' subjective experiences and illustrates the deeper meanings they ascribe to their health choices.

Reclaiming Control through Herbal Choices

Participants commonly expressed a profound sense of autonomy and empowerment through their decision to incorporate herbal remedies alongside conventional medicine. This act was not merely supplementary but symbolic of reclaiming control over their healing journey particularly after the rigid structure of hospital-based chemotherapy.

“After chemotherapy, I felt like I had lost my body. Drinking the herbal decoctions I made myself made me feel like I was taking my healing into my own hands again.” (Participant 4)

For many, the use of herbs was deeply intertwined with cultural knowledge and familial traditions, further reinforcing a sense of personal agency. Participants noted that while medical treatments were imposed, herbal remedies were chosen thus, their use represented a deliberate and meaningful act of self-care.

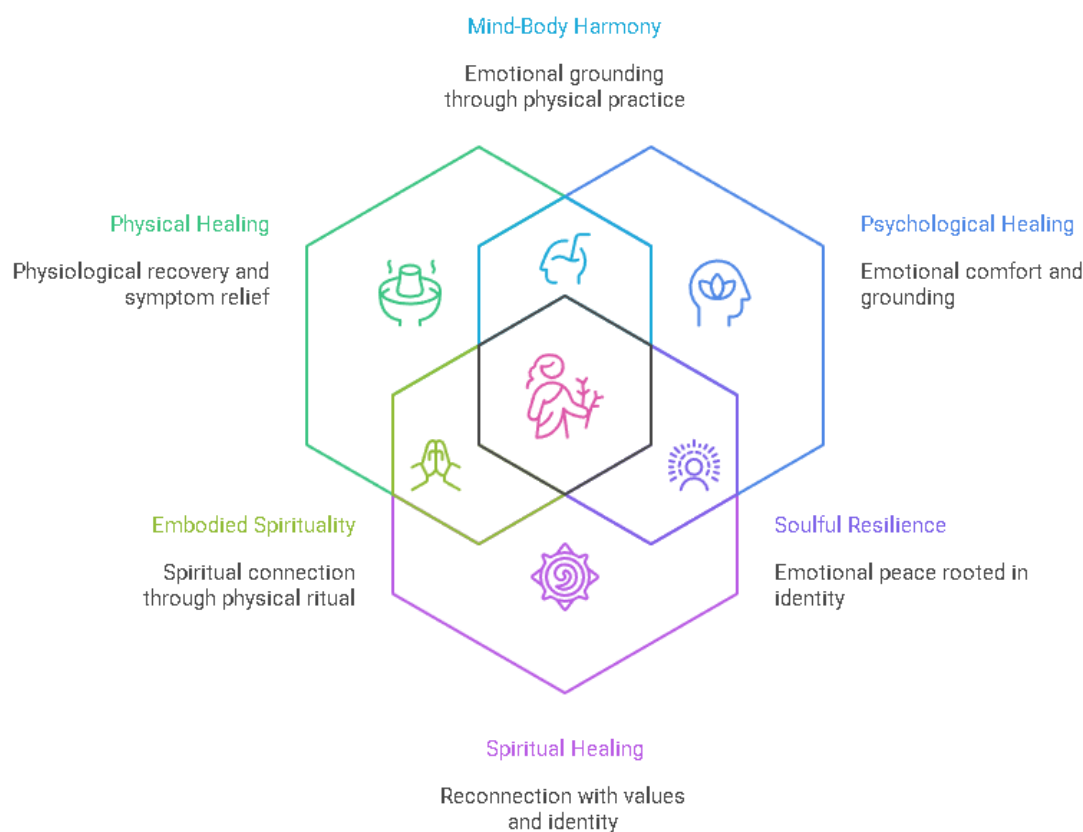
Healing Beyond the Physical Body

Several participants described their herbal regimen not only in physiological terms but as offering psychological and even spiritual comfort. The calming rituals of brewing and consuming herbal infusions were associated with emotional grounding and a return to balance.

“The hospital treated my cancer, but the herbs helped heal my soul. Every time I drank the tea, it reminded me of my grandmother and the way she took care of us.” (Participant 1)

The use of aromatherapeutic and traditional herbal formulas was perceived as a way to reconnect with one's identity and values especially important for those who felt that chemotherapy had dehumanized them. This holistic perspective broadened their definition of healing to include emotional peace and spiritual resilience.

Holistic Healing: Where Body, Mind, and Spirit Unite



Negotiating Trust Between Biomedicine and Tradition

While all participants acknowledged the necessity of chemotherapy, many described a complex negotiation between trust in biomedical protocols and the intuitive comfort offered by herbal remedies. The process of combining both treatments required critical decision-making, often in the absence of formal medical guidance.

“My doctor never really talked about herbs, but I knew I needed something else something that made me feel more human. So I combined both, even if I had to find the knowledge on my own.” (Participant 6)

Some participants expressed concerns about safety and interactions, but this was often outweighed by the psychological reassurance they received from engaging with traditional practices. This dual-trust system rational in science, emotional in tradition characterized a hybrid form of care that felt more complete to them.

Restoring Identity Through Cultural Memory

For participants with strong ties to local healing traditions, herbal remedies played a vital role in reconnecting them to their cultural roots. This reconnection helped restore a fragmented sense of identity that had been disrupted by the sterile and impersonal nature of biomedical treatment.

“I felt like the hospital treated me as a disease. When I returned to using herbs from my village, I felt seen as a whole person again.” (Participant 2)

This theme highlights how the integration of herbal practices was not merely therapeutic, but restorative on a symbolic level bringing participants back into alignment with their community, ancestry, and personal history.

Essential Conclusion

The experiences shared by participants reveal that the use of herbal and conventional therapies is not merely a biomedical decision, but a deeply meaningful journey that encompasses emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. The themes identified autonomy, holistic healing, negotiation of medical systems, and restoration of identity underscore the complex and rich realities lived by cancer survivors who pursue combined treatment approaches. These findings emphasize the importance of acknowledging patients’ cultural and experiential narratives as integral to the healing process.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that cancer survivors who integrated herbal remedies with conventional post-chemotherapy treatments experienced their healing journey as a deeply personal and culturally rooted process. Their experiences reflected themes of empowerment, spiritual reconnection, and identity restoration elements that speak directly to the central research question on how individuals make sense of combining these two healing modalities.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute meaningful insight into the lived experience of integrative healing by showing that herbal remedies serve purposes beyond physiological recovery. Participants described herbal practices as avenues for reclaiming control, reconnecting with ancestral traditions, and achieving emotional balance. These insights provide a rich and nuanced answer to the research question, as they illustrate how survivors use herbal therapies not simply as supplements to biomedical care, but as vital components of a holistic and culturally resonant healing process. The use of an interpretative phenomenological lens enabled the uncovering of these subjective layers, which may remain invisible in purely clinical or outcome-focused studies.

Connection to Previous Literature and Theory

The themes identified in this study align with prior research that highlights the cultural and symbolic importance of traditional healing practices among chronically ill populations. For example, Smith et al. (2020) emphasized the emotional coping mechanisms activated through personal rituals among breast cancer survivors, while Nguyen & Tran (2021) pointed to the cultural familiarity that drives herbal medicine use in cancer contexts. However, the present study extends these insights by demonstrating how the blending of biomedical and herbal therapies can foster a dual framework of trust where rational and intuitive healing coexist. This dynamic supports theories of embodied health movements and hybrid health practices, particularly in postcolonial health contexts where traditional knowledge and modern medicine intersect. The findings thus contribute to a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed in illness and recovery, complementing but also advancing beyond earlier descriptive work by highlighting the phenomenological depth of survivor narratives.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold important implications for both clinical practice and cultural understanding in the context of cancer recovery. From a professional standpoint, the integration of

herbal therapies by survivors indicates a need for more culturally sensitive care models that acknowledge and respect patients' lived experiences and personal healing narratives. Healthcare providers should consider the emotional and symbolic dimensions of recovery, particularly for populations where traditional knowledge systems remain integral to daily life. Culturally attuned care could enhance patient engagement, trust, and satisfaction, thereby improving overall health outcomes. On a broader social level, these insights affirm the role of indigenous healing practices not only as therapeutic agents but also as sources of identity, belonging, and empowerment in post-treatment survivorship.

Study Limitations

This study is bounded by several limitations that may influence the interpretation and transferability of its findings. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a specific cultural and geographic context in Indonesia, which may limit the applicability of results to other populations. Additionally, participants were selected through purposive sampling, which, while suitable for phenomenological inquiry, may introduce selection bias and limit representativeness. The study also relied primarily on verbal self-reporting, which may be influenced by memory, social desirability, or emotional framing. These limitations do not undermine the value of the insights generated but highlight the importance of context in interpreting the results.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The themes identified in this study open new pathways for future inquiry into integrative healing practices in diverse cultural settings. Further research could explore how different socio-economic or religious backgrounds influence the meaning-making process of combining herbal and biomedical treatments. Longitudinal studies might investigate how these experiences evolve over time and affect long-term survivorship outcomes. Moreover, expanding the scope to include healthcare professionals' perspectives could yield a more comprehensive understanding of how integrative care is perceived and facilitated within medical systems. Such work would contribute meaningfully to the development of more inclusive and contextually grounded models of survivorship care.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of cancer survivors who integrated herbal remedies with conventional treatments following chemotherapy. It revealed that survivors found deep personal meaning in herbal practices, viewing them as sources of emotional healing, cultural identity, and spiritual reconnection. The findings addressed the gap in previous literature by uncovering the subjective dimensions of integrative care often overlooked in clinical research. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study provided a nuanced understanding of how individuals construct meaning around healing in culturally rich contexts. These insights offer valuable implications for designing more holistic, culturally responsive models of cancer survivorship care.

Future research should consider comparative studies involving gender (e.g., male vs. female survivors) and geographic context (e.g., rural vs. urban populations) to explore potential variations in integrative healing experiences. Methodologically, mixed-methods or longitudinal designs could enrich the depth and applicability of findings across different survivor trajectories. Ultimately, this study calls for greater recognition of cultural meaning-making in survivorship planning and encourages healthcare practitioners and policymakers to actively integrate these perspectives into supportive care frameworks.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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