

Journal Watch

Existential Pain—An Entity, a Provocation, or a Challenge?

Strang, P., Strang, S., Hultborn, R., & Arner, S. (2004) *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 27(3), 241-250.

Prepared by: Cheryl Nekolaichuk, PhD

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Tertiary Palliative Care Unit, Grey Nuns Hospital
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Abstract:

“Existential pain” is a widely used but ill-defined concept. Therefore the aim of this study was to let hospital chaplains (n=173), physicians in palliative care (n=115), and pain specialists (n=113) respond to the question: “How would you define the concept existential pain?” A combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis of answers was conducted. In many cases, existential pain was described as suffering with no clear connection to physical pain. Chaplains stressed significantly more often the guilt issues, as well as various religious questions ($P<0.001$). Palliative physicians (actually seeing dying persons) stressed more often existential pain as being related to annihilation and impending separation ($P<0.01$), while pain specialists (seeing chronic patients) more often emphasized that “living is painful” ($P<0.01$). Thirty-two percent (32%) of the physicians stated that existential suffering can be expressed as physical pain and provided many case histories. Thus, “existential pain” is mostly used as a metaphor for suffering, but also is seen as a clinically important factor that may reinforce existing physical pain or even be the primary cause of pain, in good agreement with the current definition of pain disorder or somatization disorder.

Comments

Strengths:

- Relatively large sample, stratified by three disciplines
- Good response rate for survey research: chaplains (65%), palliative care physicians (83%), pain specialists (75%)
- Used both qualitative and quantitative analyses

Weaknesses:

- Sample limited to specific disciplines and Swedish context
- Use of an existing framework for coding data (freedom, meaning/lessness, isolation, death)

Relevance to Palliative Care:

The issue of existential pain is a significant factor for classifying and managing difficult pain syndromes. Given the potential for differences in interpretation, it is important to clarify what is meant by this concept in the clinical setting.