Embedded spirituality: gardening in daily life and stressful life experiences

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Background: There is a limited body of research examining the relationship between spirituality and leisure, or the impact of leisure in the context of daily life, and life with stressful events.

Aim: To examine the meaning of gardens and gardening across different life experiences using hermeneutic phenomenology to focus on the lived experience of leisure gardening.

Methods: Most participants were interviewed once in each season over a 1 year period usually in their home. There were 42 participants (27 women and 15 men) in this study. Fifteen individuals had been diagnosed with cancer and were in varying stages of diagnosis and treatment. Three people had a chronic and progressive disease. Four women were grieving the death of their spouse. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 80 years.

Results: In this paper, we focus on the spirituality-related themes in this study: spirituality as connectedness; spirituality as an expression of inner being; the garden as a spiritual place and gardening as spiritual activity; gardening as a spiritual journey; and, stewardship. Participants with religious views saw their garden as an extension of their spirituality and a confirmation of their beliefs. Participants with secular or sacred views of spirituality that was not related to any religious beliefs were more likely to embed their spirituality in their relationship with nature as manifested in their garden.

Conclusion: This study extends current theory regarding leisure and its contribution to meaning focused coping, and spirituality as a significant component of leisure in living with stressful health and life events.

Keywords: spirituality, leisure, horticulture.

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Introduction

In health research, spirituality is defined as transcendence, connectedness, meaning and purpose in life, integrating aspects of the self or a search for the sacred (1–3). Unruh et al. (3) suggested that spirituality is a process of working out a conceptual framework of purpose and meaning in life through a search for answers to fundamental life questions. They argued that this framework may be secular (e.g. connectedness, integrating aspect of the person, meaning and purpose in life), or sacred (e.g. belief in God, spiritual being, higher power, a reality greater than the self). Life crises interrupt daily life and open up opportunity for the contemplation and questioning at the heart of spiritual processes. Spiritual questioning contributes to identifying the values, beliefs and commitments that shape self identity (4).

Spiritual meaning that is not explicitly associated with religious practices is often associated with leisure activity (5). Leisure may have a calming and restorative function in daily life especially if leisure generates enjoyment (6, 7). Spiritual meaning in leisure frequently occurs through participation with nature-based leisure such as camping and adventure travel (8–10), dragon boat racing (11, 12), sailing, and canoeing (4, 13) when individuals comment on feeling close to nature, more at peace, and connected with others.

Gardening may be particularly conducive to spiritual experience because the gardener is interactive with nature in caring for the garden. Gardeners who write about their enjoyment in gardening often comment about feeling connected with nature and experiencing something outside themselves in the garden (14). Connectedness with nature along with the experience of transcendence may be important spiritual dimensions of leisure (15).

Leisure researchers argue that finding spiritual meaning in leisure is an important component of leisure-based coping (5, 16). Engagement in leisure may enable a reappraisal of stressful life experience that facilitates an
interpretation of the stress as a challenge that can be managed or overcome (12). One vector for this reappraisal may be through reformulation of meaning and purpose in one's life through renewed spiritual questioning and reflection.

There is limited research examining leisure as a facet of living with serious health and life issues (17, 18) or spirituality in the context of leisure and life challenges. The purpose of this study was to examine the diverse meaning of gardens and gardening, as a leisure activity, in daily life and in stressful life experiences such as living with cancer. This paper is focused on spirituality one of the primary themes identified in this study.

Method

Research design

Hermeneutic phenomenology (19) was used to design a prospective qualitative study to elicit meaning of gardens and gardening as a leisure activity. The participants were interviewed in each of the four seasons over a 1 year period. This approach enabled the interviewer to establish strong rapport with participants and gave participants an opportunity to reflect and expand on their themes from one interview to the next. It also facilitated exploring the changing meaning of gardening due to weather, seasons, health and other life or family circumstances.

Participants

The goal of recruitment was to obtain a community sample of participants 18 years and older who gardened as a leisure activity, and to compare men and women who were living with cancer with those who were cancer-free. The participants were recruited from the community using pamphlets, posters, and notices in gardening venues. Some participants were recruited from the community using pamphlets, posters, and notices in gardening venues. Some participants were recruited by a spouse or family friend.

Forty-two gardeners (27 women and 15 men) self-identified themselves as leisure gardeners and participated in this study. They ranged in age from 32 to 80 years, with the majority between 45 and 65 years. Five couples participated. Fifteen of the gardeners were living with cancer (10 women, 5 men). Nine participants had metastatic cancer; three women died either before completing the study or shortly thereafter. Although the cancer-free participants (n = 27, 17 women, 10 men) were not living with cancer, 15 were living with other challenges such as another chronic disease, disability, grief, unemployment, divorce, or supporting a spouse who was living with cancer or another chronic disease. Twelve (7 women, 5 men) of the cancer-free participants did not identify a significant health or life stress.

Of the 42 participants, 6 participated in only one interview due to their own preference, or a health issue (5 men, 2 women). The participants lived in a Canadian Maritime province, in the area of an urban city; approximately half of the sample lived in rural communities within 2 hours travel of the city.

The gardening experience of these participants was diverse. Some were recent gardeners but the majority had been gardeners for many years with large flower and vegetable beds. One gardener kept bees and had a meadow garden. Twelve participants had gardens that occupied most of their properties. These gardens had special plant collections, seating areas, and water features. Three of the twelve gardens were featured in garden tours. Three other people sold plants and seeds from their garden. Another participant grew grapes and had a successful vineyard. This sample reflected the diversity of gardening experience and expertise that might generally be found in a community sample.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted at the participant’s home and included a walk in the garden. Favourite parts of the garden were photographed. In some instances, winter interviews were conducted by telephone when poor weather interfered with travel to rural locations. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Interviews were guided by six questions: (1) How did your interest in gardening begin? (2) How important is the garden and gardening in your present daily life? (3) How does your current health and life experiences affect your interest in gardening? (4) What qualities of the garden and gardening give you satisfaction at this time of year? (5) How has the meaningfulness of the garden and gardening changed from one season to another? (6) In what ways has the garden and gardening contributed to your quality of life over the past year? All interviews were conducted as conversations by the first author with additional prompts about the participants’ current life circumstances, and health concerns. As themes emerged in interviews from participants, probes were added to the interview questions to determine whether an emerging theme had meaning for other participants.

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on a constant comparative approach (20) to construct sets of themes across the interviews with each participant, and then across participants. Emerging themes were noted in the first interview and then clarified, expanded or added to in subsequent interviews with the participant. In addition, themes from participants’ interviews were used to develop additional probes for interviews with other participants to search for confirmatory or negative cases. Emergent themes were used to construct a thematic framework by the interviewer.
(first author) and revised in response to new information generated by additional interviews. A research associate then read the first twenty interviews and revised the thematic framework in discussion with the interviewer. The thematic framework was further refined by application to a set of interviews selected on the basis of the greater complexity of the data in the interview. The thematic framework was considered complete when no new themes or categories were needed. Paradiagramatic cases were identified as exemplars of themes and opposing points of view (19). Themes related to the spiritual meaning of gardening emerged in the first interviews with the first two participants. Spiritual meaning was then further developed in subsequent interviews.

At the conclusion of the study, each participant was sent a summary of the main themes in their interviews for confirmation. Two people wrote back to clarify or expand on their summary.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Professions, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Results

The meaning of the garden and of gardening emerged as an interaction between eight key dimensions: social relationships, enjoyment in gardening, emotional expression, cognitive challenge, physical challenge, restorativeness, spirituality, and, gardening stresses/resources. Five themes were generated from the data that reflect the spiritual meanings participants associated with gardening.

Table 1 gives the distribution of these themes for women and men in this study according to their group assignment as living with cancer or being cancer free. Many participants in this study talked about the meaning of their garden as an experience of connectedness or as an expression of one’s inner being. Less common themes were those associated with the garden as a spiritual place and gardening as spiritual activity, gardening as a spiritual journey. The study themes were evident in both the cancer and the cancer-free group. More women who were living with cancer reflected on their garden as a spiritual place and gardening as spiritual activity but the gender groups are unequal in size.

The themes are discussed below using pseudonyms for participants.

Theme 1: Spirituality as connectedness

Most participants spoke about feeling connected to their garden in some way. Gardeners spoke about feeling ‘close to nature’ or having a bond between themselves, their garden, and the birds and animals that visited the garden. Feeling connected with the garden may occur because gardening is active, interactive, and interconnected. The gardener contributes to the welfare of the garden, and the garden responds in the way it grows and develops. The garden needs the care and attention of the gardener; the gardener satisfies needs for enjoyment and leisure through the garden. This interactive experience is suggested in Sarah’s comments:

I like to just sit here sometimes and just feel connected to it. Because I’ve put the plants there and then they have done what they want to do too. So it’s like being part of a whole cycle.

The germination of fragile plants from hard seed coats, the surprise of unexpected plants in new places, the colours and textures in a garden that were often beyond the gardener’s control contributed to experiencing the garden as a living system.

For those individuals living with health issues such as cancer feeling connected to a life force and witnessing survival and rebirth in the garden were poignant because as Florence stated, ‘There is a lot of death in a garden’. For Robin, gardening was at times deeply connected to coming to terms with her own mortality:

I just happened to notice lately, emotionally, how I was feeling as I looked at things turning yellow with the frost. And I thought about my illness and I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Men with cancer (n = 5)</th>
<th>Men without cancer (n = 10)</th>
<th>Women with cancer (n = 10)</th>
<th>Women without cancer (n = 17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>4 (80%)</td>
<td>8 (80%)</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>17 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of inner being</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>13 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden as a spiritual place &amp; gardening</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
<td>4 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening as spiritual journey</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (30%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>6 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>7 (41%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participants may have had data in more than one theme.
thought, ‘Oh, yes, I’m thinking about dying’. I’m thinking that is going through my mind, and then as I watch this garden die, the two things kind of click together – my body and the garden. Because in reality, the garden is a metaphor for life – the beginning and the ending and the growing period. I don’t think I had thought about that until I got sick.

Feeling connected with the garden was also about being connected with the future as well as the past. Seeds, bulbs, plants, and trees take time to grow. Gardeners with health issues were especially conscious about whether they gardened for the present or the future. Gardening for the future meant willingness to be hopeful. Monica’s garden connected her to a living system from which she drew her strength despite the metastatic cancer:

I think it shows me the fact that there is hope. Because cancer doesn’t make sense. You know, cells, body cells just going off on their own and just being parasites on the healthy system. Of course that does happen in nature too. It does happen in nature … I think it was so important for me to have an established bed here this year so it looked full. You know, it was mature and it was strong and it can survive. But feeling hopeful was not easy. Amy was diagnosed with cancer in her early thirties. Although she had been an avid gardener in the past, she was tentative in resuming it. She commented: ‘I guess I thought that gardening would give me more hope, or help me to look forward. And I guess in a way to this point it hasn’t helped, or helped as much as I would like it to. So I’m looking forward to enjoying it more, at some time.’

Monica was conscious that she might not be living in the next year. Her daughter helped her to understand that her garden would nurture others if she was no longer there. This thought helped Monica to garden even for a future without her; the garden would be for people she loved.

Other gardeners who did not have health worries also wondered about the gardens left behind. Tanya said, ‘You are sort of leaving a bit of a legacy. I mean when you move then the people who take the house … I mean that is something you have left behind. It doesn’t go away. It is still there.’ Similarly, Florence noted that in sharing her plants with others she created an implicit but unstated spiritual connection between herself and the receiver(s) in their garden. She said:

And I passed those (white violets) along. And some of the other things that I’ve gotten, I’ve passed those along. So that is a sort of spiritual thing too because you are building part of what you were in somebody else’s space, in somebody else’s garden.

Gardens often connected people in tangible ways. Basil highlighted the rose bush from which he took slips to start new roses for his children: ‘Maybe you noticed the rose bush up against the fireplace chimney here when you came. That was a rose bush that came from my parents’ home in [name of place] about 45 or 50 years ago.’ Plants were given to people when they were hospitalized. They commemorated special occasions. Plants were memories of trips, and places where the gardener had previously lived. In this way, plants became a garden narrative about the significant people and events in a gardener’s life.

Because gardens connected people, they were a means to live with and express grief. Florence made a memory garden in the shape of the first letter in her husband’s name. Laura bought a bird bath something she and her husband had discussed while he was living. Lilly’s husband died suddenly. She planted a garden bed in front of his shed ‘in case he came back.’ Beth’s last memories of her husband were about working in the garden in his last autumn. She was conscious of his presence when she assumed his gardening the next spring. The surprising bloom of two late roses on Remembrance Day, helped Carla to come to terms with her father’s death. The garden enabled these participants to manage grief and remain connected despite loss in death. Florence summarized this connectedness with loved ones:

I think I’m probably quite a spiritual person. I mean over my years, I think I have become so. And I accept those who have gone before us are with us. And they are with us when we are in the ground, when we are out there doing something in the ground. Because that is what we are. We are living beings as they are. And it all sort of meshes together. But we forget that we are just a part of that living thing. You know, we are two separate things. We are living, yes, but they are something else. But they are really not (dead).

Theme 2: Gardening as an expression of inner being

Many gardeners felt that gardening was a central component of who they were. The sentiments in the quotes given below were common in interviews:

I enjoy the garden and the colour, and part of my spirit is, I always say, colours … gardening is just such a part of me. (Denise)

I want my garden to reflect me. My neighbour’s garden is quite different but that is as it should be. It should reflect her. (Faye)

It’s sort of an extension of me, in putting my mark if you will, here. It’s sort of expressing some of my joy. (Lilly)

The garden gave the participant an opportunity to create and to recreate. Creating transformed a space and marked it as the gardener’s own place. When gardening is connected with inner being, the loss of the garden, or the capacity to garden can be very painful. Two gardeners in this study had or were having this experience. For Tom, the loss had been permanent due to poor health:
I just couldn’t bring myself to envisage at this stage of my deteriorating health to be able to maintain the thing. To me, it was almost as though I were destroying something. It was the most terrible feeling. It is hard for me to describe because it was so much a part of me. But the decision had to be made, and I did. Tom was now living in a residential setting with other seniors and participating in a residential garden and gardening club.

Peter was struggling with uncertainties in his cancer diagnosis at the end of the study year. Uncertainty caused considerable anxiety and disruption in his pleasure in all of his leisure activity. The loss affected him on a deeply emotional, psychological and spiritual level because the garden had been so much a part of his inner being and self-identity. He said:

Last year I felt very comfortable in my garden. I knew it. I knew every rock. I knew every plant. I don’t feel that anymore. It was almost like a bond there, and it’s not there any more. ... Where last year, I loved my garden, now I just like it. It’s just another thing that I have. Where it was really, really special, really up there above everything else that I did.

Peter still planted things, but gardening as a deeply meaningful leisure activity was on hold while he dealt with the uncertainties in his life.

Theme 3: The garden as a spiritual place, and gardening as spiritual activity

For gardeners who felt connected with nature and experienced the garden as an expression of self, the garden was sometimes perceived as a spiritual place. For some, this experience of the garden was rooted in thoughts about God and faith, but it was more often associated with secular spiritual meaning as noted in Jack’s comments:

For me personally it’s just I think probably spiritual more than anything else. Just seeing a hard coated seed or whatever, many of which you sometimes can’t smash with a hammer because they are so hard, that they evolve into a nice vegetable or a beautiful flower, plant … it’s certainly difficult to describe. But for me there is a real magnetism to being in the garden.

Maggie’s thoughts were similar:

There is certainly something spiritual about gardening but I’m not sure what it is – if it’s the new growth. Maybe it’s just the tranquility of it. Because I can sit in the middle of the woods and feel very close to God. ...Because to me, spiritual and God, there is no separation. And yet I am not a terribly religious person.

Beatrice enjoyed Sunday morning gardening as her spiritual time. She said:

I’m not a church going person. But why I pick Sunday morning, I don’t now. But if it is not raining, I am probably gardening Sunday morning. And that is my spiritual going to church maybe time. I don’t go to a building to hear somebody talk but I will be out in the garden.

Robin used meditation and self-hypnosis for pain. Using these strategies in her garden helped deepened their effect because the garden was also a spiritual place for her. She explained:

I can find the place to sit down and just completely relax myself. Within 30 to 45 seconds, I can feel my body going down to where I can create visualization which is part of my meditation and part of my self-hypnosis. It’s very easy to do when you are in the garden, there is something … I guess spiritual is the word. I mean you become very close to God with the blue sky and the feel of the earth under your feet. And you connect with nature, and your body becomes part of nature.

Many participants, especially those who were living with health issues or were grieving, saw their garden as a refuge, a safe place away from their worries. They described their gardens as peaceful and peace-giving. Kristine, who died shortly after completing this study, said of her garden:

You are out there and you are working, and you are at peace. ... You are using your body. Your body is at one with the soil, with the earth. It’s like you are... It’s like I’m not a person in the garden. I’m within the garden.

Theme 4: Gardening as spiritual journey

Gardeners sometimes talked about gardening as a means through which they worked out their ways of being in the world. These comments were typically specific to the gardener’s life experience.

Throughout the year of interviews, John talked about creating a self-identity and a balanced life. Although his own spiritual views were elusive and difficult to articulate, gardening was significant in his spiritual journey. He said:

And yet I wouldn’t think of myself as a particularly religious person. But as I talk, I am perhaps a bit of a spiritual person. I am not quite sure what the spirit is. ...It is difficult to talk about ... it is difficult to express. I think I used to think about spirituality in terms of a religion. And I pursued that a bit several times actually, and came away ... with a feeling of emptiness... But I still had that feeling of a need for spirituality, and I still have it. But the closest (and I don’t know how close that is) to come to grips with this spirituality has been through doing things like gardening, like sailing. ...I think for me it has to do with nature, the world around us, our environment, how I fit in as a human being in that.

Robin struggled with several chronic illnesses, and had given up her professional work due to her health. Her garden helped her to confront her ‘Why me?’ questions:

As all people come down with a chronic illness, you keep saying, ‘Why me? Like I didn’t do anything to
anybody. Haven’t I tried to help everybody?’ You know, you go through that whole thing. Sometimes you even try to barter with God. ‘If you give me back my left leg, I’ll go to church every Sunday’, or something. And I had to get out there in the garden and watch things live and watch things die, and realize that I’m no different than the apple tree or the plants that are coming up.

Gardening affirmed or complemented religious faith for some participants. Florence, Danielle and Irving all expressed similar views to Laura, who said:

I mean, creation just reminds you of God’s creation and the wonderful things that he has done. I believe that God is the creator, maybe everybody doesn’t but that is what I believe. And when I look at the intricate designs in a flower or a leaf or the birds and all of these things, how can we not believe that there was a real intelligence behind it? You know, a creator.

At the same time, while the garden affirmed faith, Danielle was also careful in separating her enjoyment in gardening from her faith:

I do it (gardening) because I love to do it. It complements my life rather than being a necessity in my life. …I guess the only refuge I feel in my life is my belief in God and that everything you do in your life leads to the end of your life. And, which is actually the beginning, and not the end.

**Theme 5: Stewardship**

Many participants felt responsible for the well-being of their garden; they cared for it as they would other living things that mattered to them. They made carefully considered choices about pesticides and fertilizers. They thought about how they would work with the land and the plant life that was already there, and whether to modify the land to suit their own desires. Brenda’s comments highlight this care-taking approach:

I’m not a very spiritual person. I guess I don’t spend too much time worrying about my place in this world. I’m not religious. However, I do have a certain sense that whatever you have here, you are supposed to take care of. So I feel that this piece of land is something that one should do something with it, something useful.

For gardeners with religious views, caring for the garden was part of being grateful to God as in Lilly’s comment: ‘Gardening somehow or another, it’s our way of giving back to God, to the earth, what has been given to us’. Florence also connected stewardship with the garden as a spiritual place and gardening as spiritual activity:

When you get into the garden or when you are outside, it is a spiritual experience because you are in God’s world. You are in the very bone of God’s world by digging in his ground. I mean you can play in your house and that’s one thing, but the ground is pristine.

I mean it’s God’s ground. … I keep thinking that you are enhancing God’s world by working in his garden, whether it’s his garden amongst people or his garden amongst his plants. I mean essentially they are all the same.

In summary, spirituality as connectedness, gardening as expression of inner being, the garden as a spiritual place and spiritual activity, gardening as a spiritual journey, and stewardship were common dimensions of spirituality in these interviews. Sometimes these dimensions were associated with a participant’s religious spiritual faith but for most participants, these perspectives came from a secular spiritual standpoint.

**Discussion**

Gardening has many meanings for people who participate in it as a leisure activity. In this analysis, we examined the spiritual meaning of gardening in a diverse sample of 42 participants some of whom were living with a progressive disease. The health situation of the participant did not determine whether their interviews had spiritual themes; it did influence some of the connections the person made between their own life situation, their mortality and their experiences within the garden. Participants with religious views saw their garden as an extension of their spirituality and a confirmation of their beliefs. Participants with secular views of spirituality were more likely to embed their spirituality in their relationship with nature as manifested in their garden. As a group, women tended to describe the spiritual meaning of their gardening more fully but four of the fifteen men also talked at length and in most interviews about their gardens in this way.

**Meaning-focused coping**

The findings of this study suggest that the spiritual meanings of leisure occupations may have an important role in reappraisal of life situations and in meaning-focused coping similar to research about women’s use of connectedness in dragon-boat racing to emphasize the hopefulness in living with breast cancer (12). Reappraisal of stress as less threatening, as something that can be lived with, shifts attention to finding meaning within difficult life situations. Parks and Folkman (21) referred to this reappraisal process as a meaning-making process in which a person endeavours to ‘reduce the incongruence between the appraised meaning of a situation or an event and the person’s pre-existing global meaning in terms of beliefs and goals’ (p. 10). Such beliefs and goals may reflect spiritual issues or other family, political, social and cultural concerns. Folkman and colleagues (21–23) have argued that meaning-focused perceptions are significant in reappraisal and coping with ongoing life stresses. Meaning-focused coping can result from seeking out positive events in daily life.
Despite stress as well as infusing neutral events in stressful life experiences with positive meaning. Over time, stressful experiences that are perceived as threatening are accompanied by the positive meaning associated with neutral events leading to more acceptance and resolution of the stressor. Enhancing the neutral and positive meaning of leisure activity when life is stressful may be important to supporting meaning-focused coping because of the potential enjoyment inherent in leisure. Meaning-focused coping has been shown to be important in living with stressful experiences such as cancer (24).

Positive meaningful events are often associated with every day leisure experiences, especially leisure involving nature or social interaction. Leisure activities of short duration provide immediate and accessible experiences of enjoyment and satisfaction, as well as distraction from painful emotions even when time is limited (25). Meaningful leisure that engages emotions and cognitions assists with disengagement from worry, promoting contemplation, and renewed problem-solving (26–28).

While meaning-focused coping through leisure may enable reappraisal to sustain hope and optimism, it may sometimes be difficult for a person to access her or his leisure resources if appraisals signify (or even, magnify) threat or loss. Uncertainty and anxiety associated with illness or with other life stress, at times interfered with the deep enjoyment that was previously associated with gardening for some participants in this study. The absence of enjoyment impaired the capacity to find meaning in leisure. For other people, it was enjoyment in gardening that enabled planning for and being hopeful about the future despite uncertainty associated with serious life issues. The experience of deep enjoyment, sometimes described in research as flow (29), created the reflective space for meaning-focused coping and spiritual reflection.

In this study, participants living with cancer or other chronic health conditions sought meaning in their situations partially through routine gardening tasks and sometimes special garden projects such as making paths or creating ponds. Gardening provided people with opportunities to feel connected to living things whose growth they nurtured, to the people with whom they enjoyed gardening, and to an inner sense of self that was not touched by illness and stress. They often felt grounded, and at peace in the garden. Perhaps most importantly, gardening provided a way to express losses as well as hopes for the present and the future. As a living system, the garden mirrored some of the very tensions within all life.

**Limitations**

Spirituality is often perceived as a personal and private concern (3). The willingness of these participants to reflect about the meaning of their gardens and gardening in this way was likely influenced in part by their gender, age, health, life circumstances, culture, and the interviewer. The results may not be transferable to other groups. The longitudinal design likely provided more opportunity to build the rapport needed for participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences. The interviewer was an experienced health professional.

The original intent of this study was to examine dimensions of meaning of gardening for men and women living with a stressful life experience such as cancer and those who were cancer-free. Nevertheless, some of the cancer-free participants were living with other serious health or life issues and may have participated for this reason. Further, some participants described themselves as not that stressed by living with their cancer. These issues limited the meaningfulness of comparison. Men were not equally represented in either participant group and were more challenging to recruit in this study.

**Implications**

The role of leisure in living with stressful health and life circumstances is under-researched even though leisure is an important component of daily life. Recent research argues that leisure has important contributions as a coping strategy in living with stressful health and life issues (6, 7, 17) and that contribution may be partially due to the possibility that the leisure activity is associated with spiritual meaning (5). Leisure activities such as gardening may have diverse spiritual meaning that may be an asset to how a person lives with stressful health or life experiences. These findings suggest that it is worthwhile to take time for meaningful leisure activity especially in the context of stressful health and life experiences. Such activity should be nurtured and encouraged by family and health professionals.

Lastly, research in the area of gardening and health has emphasized the physical benefits of gardening with much less attention to the emotional, social or spiritual benefits (30). Nevertheless, there is an emerging body of research focused on therapeutic landscapes in nature and in home gardens that is concerned with a more holistic view of the relationship between people, and such environments with health and healing (31–33). Therapeutic landscape research emphasizes the inter-connectedness of these aspects of health and their intimate relationship with gardens.

**Conclusion**

This study draws attention to the constraint and opportunity associated with enjoyment in leisure in the face of negative life events, the role of leisure in meaning-focused coping, and the spiritual dimensions of leisure and meaning-focused coping. Remaining engaged in leisure may be an important component of enabling meaning-focused coping for people living with serious health and life concerns. At the heart of meaning-focused coping is the
spiritual essence of self. More research related to spirituality and leisure in meaning-focused coping is needed to identify strategies for health promotion and chronic disease management.

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Author contribution

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