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Perceptions of aging and becoming ill: A study with elderly people in palliative care

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According to Erik Erikson's theory of the life cycle, in old age, internal conflicts can emphasize suffering. Elderly look back over their past and may feel a sense of despair due to the non-recognition of meaning in life or they may feel a sense of integrity when they attribute meaning to their achievements and losses, including illness.

Objective: To understand the perceptions of elderly people in palliative care when facing the processes of aging and illness.

Method: Exploratory, descriptive, qualitative study. We interviewed 11 elderly in palliative care due to oncologic disease. The interviews were analyzed through ALCESTE Software.

Results: From the content analysis, we identified two axes. 1) Resist to survive and live, covers two categories: Resilient development, which mentioned the challenges throughout their lives trajectories, including few opportunities in accessing studies, financial difficulties, child labor, precarious living conditions, lack of basic sanitation and loss of parents and spouses; and the category Aging with integrity, which


portrays the coping strategies used to deal with aging and illness, including cognitive restructuring used to change the vision of a stressful situation in order to see it under a positive light, the spiritual support, which included faith, reading sacred books and the practice of prayer, and, finally, they also used acceptance as a coping strategy. The second axis: 2) Resisting to die well, covers a single category Stress in illness that emphasized the elderly's perceptions of stress related to illness, highlighting, the difficulty in accessing treatment.

Conclusions: Despite the adverse experiences along life trajectory and illness, the participants adopted a positive posture toward aging and becoming ill. They were able to live with integrity by using resilient coping strategies.

Speaker Biography

Mariana dos Santos Ribeiro is a nurse. She is specialized in aging by the Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil and holds a master's degree in nursing from the University of Brasilia, Brazil. She has publications in geriatrics and in palliative care and participates to international conferences in the area.

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