



Feature Article

Promoting self-transcendence and well-being in community-dwelling older adults: A pilot study of a psychoeducational intervention



Valerie Lander McCarthy, PhD, RN^{a,*}, Jiyong Ling, MS, PhD, RN^b,
Sharon Bowland, PhD, LCSW^c, Lynne A. Hall, DrPH, RN^a, Jennifer Connelly, BSN, RN^a

^a University of Louisville, USA

^b Michigan State University, USA

^c Eastern Washington University, USA

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ABSTRACT

Self-transcendence changes how older adults perceive themselves, their relationships with others, the material world, and the metaphysical or spiritual dimension. It is associated with multiple indicators of well-being. The purpose of this pilot study ($N = 20$) was to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of a psychoeducational intervention to increase self-transcendence and well-being in older adults. Data were analyzed using generalized estimating equations. All variables trended in the directions hypothesized. Self-transcendence increased in the intervention group and decreased in the control group but not significantly. The group \times time interaction for life satisfaction was significant ($z = 2.89$, $p = .004$). This feasibility study supports further investigation to assess the effectiveness of the intervention in a larger sample.

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Self-transcendence (ST) is an inherent, late-life developmental process involving a modified worldview that shapes an individual's perspective on the self, relationships with others, the nature of the material world, and of a dimension beyond the here and now.¹ ST may be instrumental in helping older adults cope effectively with the challenges and opportunities that come with aging, but opportunities for optimal development of ST vary. While challenging life circumstances, such as a life-threatening diagnosis, have been shown to promote development of ST,² some individuals may have fewer personal and financial resources for development than others. Thus affordable, practical programs that support optimal development of ST which can be adapted for older adults in a variety of settings and populations are needed.

The Psychoeducational Approach to Transcendence & Health (PATH) Program piloted in this feasibility study was designed to increase ST and indicators of overall well-being among community-dwelling adults aged 60 years and older at a community senior center. Recognizing that, as with other developmental processes, it is not possible to create or cause ST, we hypothesized that the

theory-based PATH Program would support and foster an individual's optimal development of ST and that potential indicators of well-being would improve with increased ST.

Theoretical basis for the PATH intervention

The PATH intervention piloted in this feasibility study was based on Reed's^{2,3} mid-range Theory of Self-transcendence. Most theorists share the view that transcendence is an inherent, late life developmental process which involves a change in perspective and a tendency toward a higher levels of consciousness in late life.^{2–10} According to Reed's theory, when faced with vulnerability or awareness of mortality, individuals of any age have the capacity to develop ST and to benefit from its positive effects on mental health and well-being.³ Reed's theory is largely congruent with other theorists' views of transcendence but differs in that Reed's view of ST "embodies experiences that connect rather than separate a person from self, others, and the environment" (p. 106).¹¹ Reed holds that ST helps older adults see living, aging, and dying as a meaningful process.³

A significant body of research demonstrated relationships between ST and indicators of well-being in multiple populations including young adults,¹² middle-aged adults,^{13,14} and adults facing terminal or life-changing illnesses,^{15–22} as well as caregivers of

* Corresponding author. School of Nursing, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, USA. Tel.: +1 502 852 8395.

E-mail address: vemcca01@louisville.edu (V.L. McCarthy).

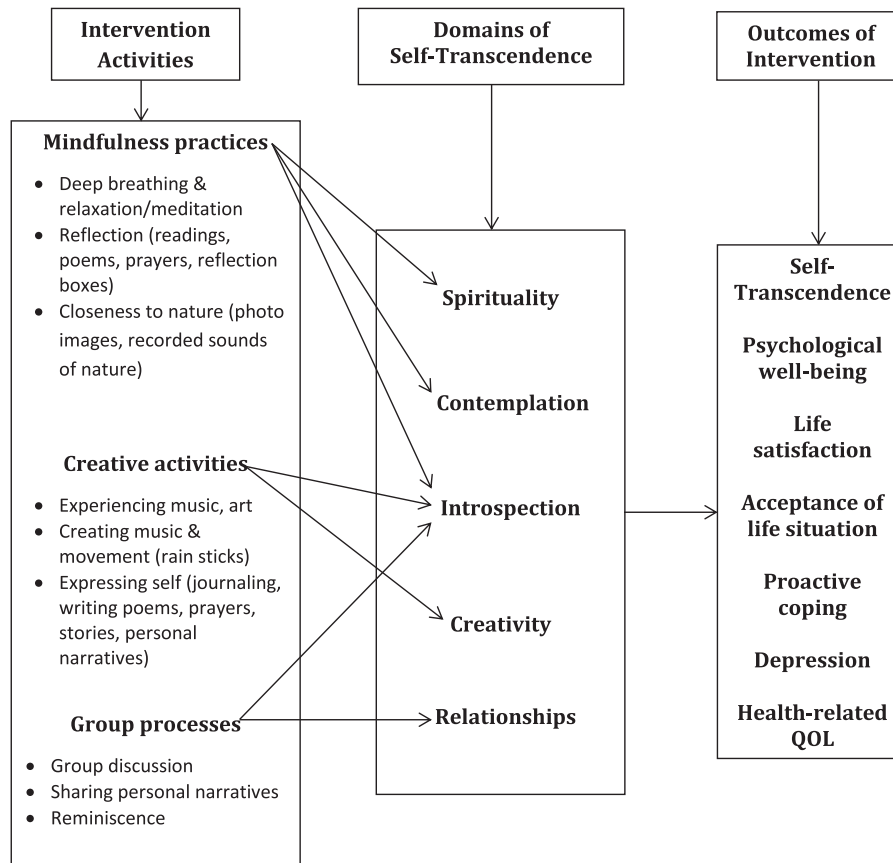


Fig. 1. Model of the PATH intervention methods.

persons with Alzheimer's disease,²³ homeless individuals,²⁴ and members of a faith community.²⁵ ST was associated with increased well-being and quality of life,^{14,17,18,20,24,25} acceptance,^{13,21,23} reaching out for support and coping,^{18,24} and decreased depression.¹³ Increased spirituality or spiritual equilibrium,^{12,15,16,21,22,25,26} sense of purpose and meaning in life,^{14–16,20–22,26} and feelings of connectedness to self, others, and a higher dimension^{14–16,21,22,26} were also associated with higher levels of ST.

Similar associations have been noted in older adult samples, including persons with Alzheimer's Disease²⁷ and caregivers of persons with dementia.²³ Among older adults living in nursing homes, ST was related to well-being, meaning in life, and hope which helped transcend losses of later life.^{28–30} Multiple studies showed ST was inversely related to depression in community-dwelling older adults,^{31–35} and positively related to resilience, sense of coherence, and purpose in life,³⁵ coping,^{36–38} physical and mental health,^{32,33} and functional ability.^{39,40}

Intervention research provides some support for the hypothesis that ST can be increased or that it has positive effects on indicators of well-being. Reminiscence,³⁴ creative bonding,²⁷ poetry writing,²³ and support groups⁴¹ all increased indicators of ST. Effects of ST interventions included: increased resilience, decreased depressive symptoms and burden, reaching out for information and support and reaching inwardly to examine life values¹⁵; group bonding with expanded self-boundaries, increased comfort, appreciation of supportive others, and ability to create meaning¹⁶; and greater acceptance, empathy, self-awareness, reflection, creativity, and helping others.²³ It is not clear if the effects of ST apply across cultures or if disease progression or severity was related to ST.⁴²

Conceptual model

Based on the process of concept analysis, a conceptual model of ST¹ was developed to provide a rationale for the content and structure of the PATH Program. Literature from philosophy, theology, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and nursing was identified and organized into five logically-related categories or domains of ST, representing various aspects of this complex and abstract concept. The conceptual model describes five domains of ST: (1) *relationships* with others in the past, present, and future; (2) *introspection* or looking within the self; (3) *creativity* or expressing the self; (4) *contemplation* of the nature of this world; and (5) *spirituality* or thinking about the nature of the next world. Domains are not hierarchical but dynamic and overlapping, interacting amongst one another.

While literature on specific activities likely to increase development of ST directly is limited, evidence exists to support methods for development of each of the five individual domains of ST. Thus evidence-based activities shown to support each of the five individual domains were combined as the basis for development of the PATH intervention program. Fig. 1 demonstrates the relationships among intervention activities, domains of ST, and the outcome of ST, with activities grouped as either group processes, mindfulness practices, or creative activities.

Purpose and specific aims

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of a psychoeducational intervention to increase self-transcendence and well-being of older adults. The insights

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