

The experiences of participants in religious healing rituals in Lourdes: The role of noetic meaning and identity shift

ABSTRACT:

Background

Lourdes is a Catholic pilgrimage site in France, best known for the occasional miraculous cures of disease which occur there. Our interest is in healing of the whole person, rather than curing of physical disease. We hypothesised that transcendent (noetic) experiences resulting from healing rituals in Lourdes would facilitate healing.

Aims

We undertook research in Lourdes to ascertain whether pilgrims have transcendent experiences there, what might facilitate these and their effects on individuals.

Method

A team of 5 researchers spent 10 days interviewing pilgrims and others, obtaining pictorial representations of peoples' perceptions of what is happening there, and observing the various rituals and events that take place in Lourdes. We transcribed all interviews and undertook a thematic analysis of the data.

Results

We obtained transcripts from 67 interviews (people aged 15-87, 72% female). 'Change' resulting from being in Lourdes was the biggest theme. 26 of them described some out-of-the-ordinary 'transcendent' experience whilst in Lourdes. Being alone in the grotto was the commonest stimulus. These experiences were often very intense, leading to feelings of immense joy, peace or love, and a sense of connection with something outside the self. Some respondents described lasting health benefits.

Conclusions

Being in Lourdes changes people. Transcendent experiences are relatively common in pilgrims visiting Lourdes, and they can lead to improved health and wellbeing, altered meaning, and the healing of symptoms (in the absence of disease cure). Perhaps this is the true 'miracle' of Lourdes.

Keywords

Transcendent experiences, Healing, Rituals, Lourdes

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