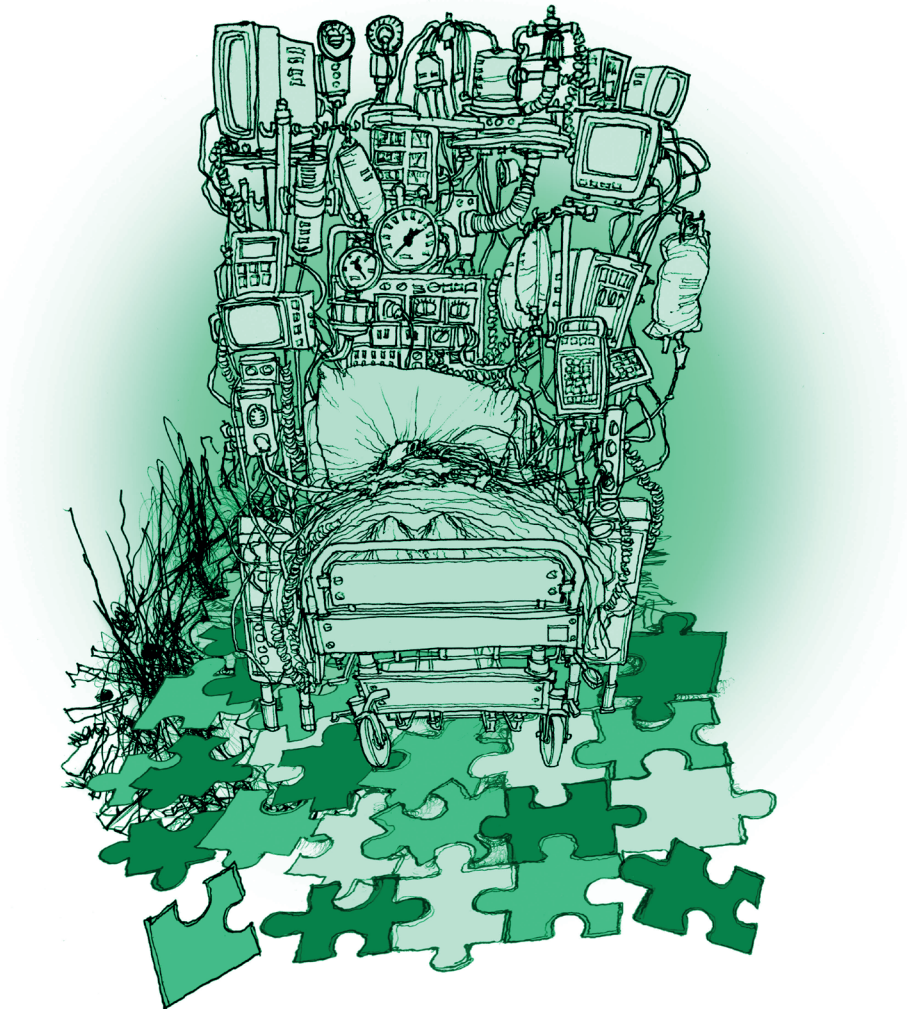


2

MODES OF RELATING TO CONTINGENCY



2

MODES OF RELATING TO CONTINGENCY

This chapter is based on:

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Contribution of the author of this dissertation:

The author participated in the conception and design of the study and the analysis of the data. In addition, the author revised several versions of the article (first draft written by RK) and read and approved the final manuscript.

ABSTRACT

Objective

Throughout their lives, people are confronted with unexpected life events, which can be difficult to incorporate into their life narratives. Such a confrontation can result in an experience of contingency. Different ways of relating to contingency have been described by Wuchterl: denying, acknowledging, and “encounter with the Other.” In the present article, we aim to trace these theoretical distinctions in real-life experiences of patients.

Method

We analyzed 45 interviews using the constant comparative method with a directed content analysis approach in the Atlas.ti coding program. The interviews originated from a randomized controlled trial evaluating an assisted reflection on life events and ultimate life goals. Seven spiritual counselors from six hospitals in the Netherlands conducted the interviews from July of 2014 to March of 2016. All 45 patients had advanced cancer.

Results

We found four different modes into which relating to contingency can be classified: denying, acknowledging, accepting, and receiving. With denying, patients did not mention any impact of the life event on their lives. In acknowledging, the impact was recognized and a start was made to incorporate the event into their life. In accepting, patients went through a process of reinterpretation of the event. In receiving, patients talked about receiving insights from their illness and living a more conscious life.

Significance of results

Our study is the first to investigate the different ways of relating to contingency in clinical practice. The defined modes will improve our understanding of the various ways in which cancer patients relate to their disease, allowing caregivers to better target and shape individual care.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout their lives, people are invariably confronted with unexpected life events. These encounters can be positive or negative, but seriously negative experiences often affect people most profoundly. Life events with a profound impact are known to raise questions about life itself and can be difficult to incorporate into one's life. These experiences are called experiences of contingency. Contingency refers to the idea that everything – including one's own life – could have been different, and compared to one's plans and expectations could develop otherwise. In other words, the occurrence of the life event is a possibility, not a necessity [1-3]. Although in principle all life events can be considered as contingent events, contingency in practice will be experienced when an event is significant for the person's life as a whole, when it adversely affects personal life goals, and when the event cannot naturally be integrated into one's life [4]. A diagnosis of incurable cancer is often a tremendous shock and difficult to interpret in the context of one's personal life narrative [5-8]. It may evoke such existential questions as "Why me?" "Why now?" "What will my future look like?" and "What is the value of life?" [9, 10].

In traditional communities of the 19th century, actions and choices were constrained because each individual was anchored within the binding structure of social, cultural, and political norms and values, so that the integration of adverse events was taken care of within the community [11]. In our current and more liquid modern times, the identity of people is not so clearly determined by these grounding structures [12, 13]. People define themselves less in social terms and increasingly construct and justify their lives in terms of narratives that support self-control [1, 14]. This allows them to create their own structure of plausibility from which they interpret daily life. The creation of such a structure requires the making of a story [15, 16]. A story creates a context in which events of the past, present, and future are fused into a plausible whole that serves the personal goals that one pursues.

Thus, the activity of linking these events by describing what has happened enables people to understand the meaning of these events [17]. Construction of life narratives is an ongoing process that locates the narrator in the middle of his story, thereby maintaining a continuous process of self-interpretation [18, 19]. The need for these explanatory narratives is even stronger when specific life events force the development of a whole new storyline. Life crises can mark the start of reflection and evaluation of questions about who we are and where we go in life [18, 20].

According to the German philosopher Kurt Wuchterl, the contingency of the world is not always acknowledged. People are inclined to develop a theoretical explanation for

every event, assuming that everything can and should be explained either in terms of human reason or the laws of nature [21, 22]. In explaining how the world works, people have often ignored or denied the contingency of events, even though contingency is inherent to the world itself [22]. Repudiating contingency is mostly done on the argument of an all-encompassing reason, by the laws of nature, or the will of a higher power, in which reference to unexpectedness – as is inherent in contingent events – is completely removed.

This notion of contingency as described by Wuchterl is not a general psychological notion, although it touches upon different concepts within (health) psychology. Much research has been carried out in the field of coping, describing how people deal with unexpected life events [23-28]. Pargament and others have distinguished a specific form of coping – religious coping – which may positively or negatively contribute to dealing with severe life events [29-32]. In addition, resilience research seeks to answer the question of why some people cope more effectively than others with certain situations [27, 33]. The common denominators in all these approaches are that they are based on stress theory and that they deal with mechanisms of appraisal and adaptive behavior, primarily focusing on how people function. Contingency theory, however, is a specific religious-philosophical approach that deals with the content of how people evaluate situations in relation to their worldview. This evaluation is crucial in the understanding of how people deal with critical situations. Contingency theory can be a valuable addition to the concepts and approaches within (health) psychology since it adds notions of purpose and intent to the functionalist approach of coping-based theories.

Not every unexpected event can be valued as being contingent from a religious-philosophical perspective. It has to meet certain criteria. According to Wuchterl, a personal issue is only religious-philosophical contingent when it (1) is judged within one's belief system as ontologically contingent, that is, not necessary to happen nor impossible; (2) resists every attempt by human actions to eliminate this non-necessity; (3) is accompanied by an existential interest; and (4) triggers a reflexive impulse to argumentatively deal with the contingent phenomenon [22].

Wuchterl describes two ways in which people can relate to contingency, that is, narratively integrating these experiences into one's story of life. He describes these ways as "acknowledging" and "encounter with the Other." People who acknowledge that the world itself is ontologically contingent recognize the fact that unexpected things can happen that cannot always be explained. Questions remain open, and there is space to relate to something beyond our tangible world. An "encounter with the Other" refers to an encounter with something that is beyond human understanding and intelligibility.

This possibility is called a “contingency encounter,” although that which is encountered is the “Total Other.” This encounter creates, as it were, the openness for new possibilities and opportunities. One is open to passively receive things that might happen or insights that might arise from this “new reality.” The different ways of relating to contingency as distinguished by Wuchterl have not yet been examined in clinical practice. Here we aim to examine if we can trace these theoretical distinctions – denying contingency, accepting contingency, encounter with the Other – empirically in the experiences of patients with advanced cancer.

METHODS

To investigate differences in how patients relate to contingency in clinical practice, we analyzed interviews that spiritual counselors held with advanced cancer patients about their experiences of being ill and the existential meaning they attributed to it. In order to trace Wuchterl’s conceptual distinction, we undertook our empirical research in two phases: development and validation.

Development Phase

As a conceptual starting point, we used Wuchterl’s trichotomy (denying, acknowledging⁷, encounter), where after 23 interviews with advanced cancer patients had been analyzed. The interviews were conducted by spiritual counselors using a semi structured interview method exploring the patients’ experiences with cancer, as described earlier [34].

The constant comparative method was employed with a directed content analysis approach, while our analyses started with a theory as guidance for the initial codes [35] and making use of the Atlas.ti coding program [36]. We started with the formation of categories, subsequently establishing boundaries, and ended with summarizing the content of each category in a one-page document [37, 38]. Based on these analyses, we came to distinguish four modes of relating to contingency: denying, acknowledging, accepting, and receiving. To improve the quality of the code descriptions, we organized a peer group meeting with eight researchers from Radboud University Nijmegen. These included two professors of pastoral theology and religious studies and six doctoral students working on different projects within practical and empirical religious studies.

⁷ In the published version of this article, we erroneously used the term “accepting” instead of “acknowledging.”

Using their feedback, we improved the code descriptions and defined more strict inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Context of the study

The interviews used for validation of our model were conducted by seven spiritual counselors working in different hospitals. Four of them had Roman Catholic backgrounds, two were Humanists, and one Protestant. All counselors had more than seven years' experience working in a hospital setting. Their experiences with the interview method and the study protocol of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) have been described elsewhere [39, 40]. In short, the spiritual counselor asks the patient to draw a lifeline from birth until the present, with highs and lows indicating important life events. The patient chooses three important life events, which are discussed in more detail, and their expectations for the future and life goals are discussed. The spiritual counselors were trained by our research team to examine the experiences of contingency caused by these life events. In the present analysis, we examined one of the three life events identified by all patients, namely, the life event of having incurable cancer.

Validation phase

In the second phase, we used 45 interviews, originating from an RCT that evaluated an assisted structured reflection on life events and ultimate life goals to improve quality of life. To test the final code descriptions, an interrater reliability test (IRR) was performed with three coders (RK, IH, MSR) using fragments from eight RCT interviews. The other interviews ($n = 37$) were coded by one researcher (RK) for reasons of efficiency, but in case of doubt ($n = 9$) the interview fragments were coded and discussed by all three researchers (RK, IH, MSR) until consensus was reached.

Design of the study

Patients were recruited from seven different hospitals: two academic hospitals, one categorical hospital, and four local hospitals. The Medical Ethics Review Committee of the Academic Medical Centre Amsterdam confirmed that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) did not apply to our study and therefore an official approval of this study by the committee was not required (Letter June, 27th, 2012). The inclusion criteria for patients were as follows: 18 years of age with advanced cancer not amenable to curative treatment and with a life expectancy 6 months. Patients with a Karnofsky Performance Status score 60, insufficient command of the Dutch language, and a current psychiatric disease were excluded. Data were collected from July of 2014 until March of 2016. The interviews lasted for from 35 to 144 minutes.

RESULTS

Patient demographics are provided in Table 1. Twenty-one males and 24 females were included.

Table 1. Patients' demographics

Sociodemographic characteristics	N 45	% 100
Age		
Mean, SD	60	12
Gender		
Male	21	47
Female	24	53
Education		
< Compulsory	11	24
> Compulsory	34	76
Work		
Working	17	38
Not working	28	62
Living arrangement		
Married	33	37
Living with partner	6	13
Living alone	6	13
Religious affiliation		
Roman Catholic	8	18
Protestant	8	18
Other Christian	5	11
Humanistic	6	13
Atheistic	3	7
Non-religious	15	33

All patients had Dutch nationality, and their mean age was 60. The four codes indicating the four different modes that resulted from our analysis are described below. All quotations are derived from the 45 analyzed interviews that were held as part of an RCT (see Table 2).

Table 2. Quotes

Quote 1 - Denying	Yes, but what is that diagnosis? It is a pure low point when you are told you have cancer, but I don't want to have it. I want to keep going, I'll fight for it, too. I'm still very active in everything. (male, 72, gastric cancer)
Quote 2 - Denying	I didn't want to be written off or anything, I was very ill. And I still have that. I almost never tell people that I'm sick. Because then they think "Oh I don't have to invest in her because she's going to die anyway," or something like that. You know, that kind of feeling. So I just wanted to go on and that's just what I did. (female, 68, neuroendocrine tumor)
Quote 3 - Denying	I: What are important life goals for you? P: Well to keep living for a while. That the cancer doesn't get the better of me. [...] I've arranged everything. [...] So it's all on the computer, and if the computer crashes, it's all on a USB stick. Everything is settled. [...] It doesn't dominate my life, though. That wouldn't be good. (male, 64, kidney cancer)
Quote 4 - Acknowledging	Yes, when I heard I was sick. Then everything..., everything changed. [...] Your plans for the future, everything is uncertain. (female, 62, gynecological cancer)
Quote 5 - Acknowledging	If they had told me, "You are sick and it is," so to speak, "lung cancer because you have smoked all your life and lived in the wrong way," then I would say okay. But in this case, I just think, "Well... [...] a low point, that is something you don't expect. Then you just think it's over. It's done." (Male, 65, gastric cancer)
Quote 6 - Acknowledging	I just didn't understand it. I was really angry about it, yes. Well, don't get me wrong – I don't blame the doctors. But you just think, "Why me again?" "Why does this happen to me for the second time?" Well, nobody can answer that question, neither can I. [...] So I let go of it, because it doesn't make sense trying to figure it out. [...] I just have to learn to deal with it. (male, 60, bone cancer)
Quote 7 - Accepting	That's a big cliché of course, but yeah, "That's not possible, that can't happen to me. That counts for everyone else, but not for me." I: It shouldn't? P: Well, shouldn't... [...] but I accepted it pretty quickly. Really accepted. I thought, "Why should I complain? I'm already 62, such a nice husband, lovely children. [...] I have a beautiful life, had a beautiful childhood." I wouldn't know what I could actually give as a reason for why I should be one of the lucky ones not to be affected by the disease. (female, 65, breast cancer)
Quote 8 - Accepting	But that's a whole process of letting go of everything. It doesn't happen automatically. [...] I've learned to go deep, really learned how to go deep. Just crying, weeping, shouting it out when I can't manage anymore. God has abandoned me – that kind of feeling. And yet still to pick yourself up again and fight when you have to fight. But you can't keep fighting, and you can't keep going deep. (male, 35, brain cancer)
Quote 9 - Accepting	And I also knew it had helped me get a better understanding of myself. Through the disease, by being confronted with myself when lying on the couch for days in pain, during sleepless nights in agonizing pain, then you start thinking about yourself. Then you start changing things. You notice that some things are not good. And you also see things differently. You start seeing the world differently. [...] I really try to go with the flow now. It's difficult, but I have learned from it. [...] I've done something with it, and it has brought me something too. Sometimes the lesson is hard. (female, 68, neuroendocrine tumor)
Quote 10 - Receiving	I do believe that I have to go through this. I believe this, and that it happens for a reason. But that you have to learn something valuable from it. Or change your whole life. At least, do something with it. Not just go on like before. (female, 24, gynecological cancer)

Table 2. Quotes (continued)

Quote 11 - Receiving	I'm natural now. I have a much more positive outlook on life and enjoy a lot more things. You know, things used to be just normal. You take everything for granted. [...] I think that what this whole thing of being ill has brought me is that I think a lot more about the spiritual side of things. Not that I am suddenly religious or anything. I don't believe in God. I always believed that there is something more but not really by definition a god. But I think about it a lot more now. (female, 24, gynecological cancer)
Quote 12 - Receiving	P: A chance, yes I think so. To develop myself. To change myself. [...] I think in your life things happen to you so you can do something with them. So developing yourself in a better way or getting a different perspective on life or whatever. I: Different perspective, that means..? P: Uh yea. To do something with it, what has happened to you. How I see it now. I can talk easily about my breast cancer and when I see how others react to it, I think, "Yes. I am doing something with it, I'm trying to help other people with it." (female, 53, breast cancer)

Development phase

In our analysis, we focused on the three conceptual distinctions proposed by Wuchterl: denying, acknowledging⁸, and “encounter with the Other.” In our data, we found a lot of statements that indicated acknowledgment and reinterpretation of the contingency of the event, but without full acceptance and integration. These statements did not fit the definition of “acknowledging,” nor that of “encounter.” Therefore, we defined the additional code of “accepting.” Also, for the description of Wuchterl’s “encounter,” we found that patients talked more about “receiving” something rather than “encountering” something, so we labeled this mode “receiving.”

Mode 1: Denying

In the analyzed interviews, patients who talked about their experiences such that they were not engaging in an interpretation process were categorized as “denying” the contingency. Most of the time, denial of contingency is seen in that which is absent, for instance, in a lack of existential questions, rather than clear statements of denial. We did find some statements of patients who did not want “it,” or did not want to talk about their cancer, pushed it aside, or emphasized their activeness to live on as they did before (quote 1) (see Table 2). In contingency denial, the patient has not started or has aborted the interpretation process; there is no real confrontation with one’s own vulnerability or the limits of one’s own abilities (quote 2). Sometimes a definitive explanation of the event is given or the existential meaning of the event is denied, leaving no questions about the event or its cause.

⁸ This paragraph differs slightly from the published version of this article because we had erroneously used “accepting” instead of “acknowledging” there.

This denial is associated with coping, as defined in medical psychology. Coping can be seen as a strategy to restore the balance in life as soon as possible, in order to be functional again and continue with life, thereby avoiding an interpretation crisis (quote 3). The phrases used in the case of contingency denial are often formulated as rationalizations or statements that express the respondent's lack of need to ask questions or need to understand the cause of an event. It most often reveals itself by that which is lacking, when no questions are asked and no process, ultimate meaning, or references to the existential domain are discussed (quote 4). Some patients talk about pure bad luck, but later on also talk about their struggles to incorporate this "bad luck" into their lives. Therefore, statements that mention "chance" or "bad luck" should not automatically be linked to the code of denial. Statements about the existential meaning of this "bad luck" indicate that the interpretation of "bad luck" is the result of a search for a meaningful interpretation and not a definitive answer that immediately halts the interpretation process.

Mode 2: Acknowledging

When contingency is acknowledged, the experience of contingency is "taken seriously," and it is recognized as an event that has an impact on one's life as a whole (quote 5). No definitive explanation is given for the event, but a process of interpretation has been set in motion, searching for the cause and meaning of the life event. The event raises questions that cannot be answered immediately. Important in the acknowledgment of contingency is seeing the non-necessity and non-impossibility of the situation. It is recognized that it goes beyond one's understanding to grasp the cause of the event, but there is a need to relate to something that lies beyond one's capabilities. Asking questions about the cause of the event (e.g., "Why me?" "Why now?" "Why did this happen?") is seen to be a key element in this mode of acknowledging (quote 6). Acknowledgment of contingency is only the first step in the narrative interpretation process, an attempt to place the event within one's life story. The experience of contingency is confronted, and the impact and significance of the event for one's life as a whole are recognized. However, the event is not accepted and not yet integrated into one's life story (quote 7). The phrases that are used to describe this can be formulated as verbs relating to how it should be or what they have to do.

Mode 3: Accepting

In the mode of accepting contingency, not only the contingency of a life event is acknowledged, but also the new reality that comes with it is recognized and accepted as a part of the person's life after the event. This acceptance is one step further toward an integration into the personal life story and in the direction of a new reality (quote 8). In this mode, the statements are more passively formulated compared to the previous

mode. The struggle to place the event into the whole life story is also part of acceptance (quote 9). Accepting the contingent life event goes one step beyond acknowledging, because the event is now also an integrated part of one's life. Sometimes this is still a struggle, but in some cases new possibilities are seen and discovered. However, this is only the beginning of the learning process; full integration of this new opportunity is only completed in the mode of "receiving." In accepting, the patients are actively looking for a way in which the event can be integrated into their life. This is often expressed in the form of a process, with the use of verbs, for example, "learning, accepting, seeing." In this mode, the reinterpretation of the event and the significance for one's own life are clearly stated (quote 10).

Mode 4: Receiving

In contrast to "encounter," as defined by Wuchterl, we observed an attitude of receiving: that what is received often concerns patients' ultimate life goals. In this mode of relating to contingency, there is full integration of the event into one's life story. The phrases that are used often denote transformation and deriving new insights, influencing the choices made in life. Patients refer to values that have become more important – for example, being more conscious or aware in life, taking more enjoyment from the here and now, having more meaningful relationships. Such phrases are mostly formulated in the past tense (quote 11). Patients in the mode of receiving often talk about insights they have received from relating to the contingency of an event. They also talk about something that transcends our tangible world – for example, "it happens for a reason" or "someone/some power did this." This transcendence has a broad meaning. It can be something abstract, like "the universe," "the unknown," or the "ultimate good," and some people call it "a higher power/God" (quote 12). In the mode of receiving, "new possibilities" are central, there is space in which to act, and it is preceded by a process of transformation and creation of new insights. There is not only the acknowledging of the world's ontological contingency, but it is a real encounter with "the other side": that which we cannot know and cannot see (quote 13).

Final model

If we look at the four modes, their definitions (see Table 3) and their implications for different dimensions of life, we come to a schematic representation (see Figure 1). The red circle at the bottom of the figure represents a contingent life event. A life event can have a situational meaning for the person in the here and now. It can also have a more existential meaning for a person in terms of his/her life as a whole. Sometimes a life event can have a spiritual meaning for a person, regarding a higher reality. At the left, these three dimensions are specified. The first mode –denying– bends to the right because it represents not acknowledging the impact on one's whole life. When an interpretation

process is begun, it is the first step toward integration. This is the second mode – acknowledging. The blue arrow symbolizes a process moving toward full acceptance. In the mode of accepting, there is room for reinterpretation of a life event; hence the black arrow. At the end of the model, the mode of receiving is placed in the dimension of a higher reality, discovering the new possibilities and new insights.

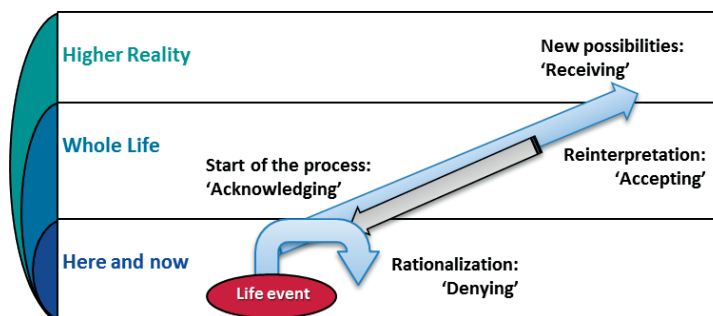


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the four modes.

Table 3. Definitions of the different modes of relating to contingency

Denying	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No interpretation process is started to incorporate the event into one's life. No existential questions are being asked and no attempt is being made to understand the situation. 2. The event is explained by stating that the event was necessary or destined to happen, due to 'absolute chance', the laws of nature or a very strict theocentric worldview. In this case the explanation is not an outcome of a search for interpretation, but it is a way to fix contingency and to end the interpretation process. 3. 'Living a normal life or live on as before' is often mentioned in this mode, emphasizing their activeness.
Acknowledging	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A person talks about the impact of the event on their entire life. The cause of the event can be rationalized but the impact is acknowledged. 2. Questions are asked, such as: why did this happen, why me, did I do anything wrong, is it just chance, bad luck? These questions are often asked at the beginning of the process; they are the first attempts to include the event into one's own life story. 3. People sometimes talk about accepting, but merely in the direction of 'should' or 'ought', as a necessity instead of a completed process. This mode only indicates the start of the process, it has not become a full part of their lives but they are working towards that inclusion.
Accepting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The impact of the life event on one's life as a whole is recognized and there is a difficult process going on of incorporating this event into the life story. 2. This process can be at the beginning in only trying to integrate the event into a story, but it can also be more towards discovering the new possibilities. 3. There are often signs of a reinterpretation of the event: a person looks back on the life event in a different way than at the outset. For example: at first the event can be interpreted as something bad, but in second instance it might have also a positive connotation.
Receiving	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A person acknowledges the impact of the event on his/her life, has gone through a process of accepting and can now receive new possibilities from this new reality that which transcends our human framework, and to derive new insights from that encounter. 2. It is a process of transformation, reshaping and creating new insights. The person is open to meet that which transcends our human framework, and to derive new insights from that encounter. 3. More passive language is used, referring to the completed process of acceptance and integration, and the received insights and/or living a more conscious life.

Validation phase

To test the final code descriptions, an IRR was performed and the calculated value of Cohen's kappa was 0.83, which can be interpreted as "very good agreement" [41]. Of all the interviews (n = 45) that have been encoded, only two were assigned the code of "denying," and two were assigned the code of "receiving." Most (n = 24) were assigned the code of "recognizing," and many were assigned the code of "accepting" (n = 17). We did not observe major differences between the four different modes and the sociodemographic characteristics (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of the validation phase

Sociodemographic characteristics	Denying n = 2	Acknowledging n = 24	Accepting n = 17	Receiving n = 2
Age				
mean	68	61	60	39
Gender				
Male	2	10	8	0
Female	0	14	8	2
Education				
< compulsory	0	3	3	0
> compulsory	2	19	15	2
Work				
Working	0	10	5	2
Not working	2	14	12	0
Marital status				
Married	2	17	13	1
Living with partner	0	3	2	1
Living alone	0	4	2	0
Religiosity				
Religious	1	10	9	1
Non-religious	1	14	8	1

DISCUSSION

Our study is the first to investigate the theoretical distinctions put forward by Wuchterl regarding the experience of contingency in a clinical setting. The described modes of relating to contingency will make it possible to understand the experiences of cancer patients and allow caregivers to better target and shape individual care. Caring for the existential issues of patients is usually referred to as spiritual care. Spirituality can be an important element of the way patients face chronic illness, suffering, and loss. Spiritual care begins by truly listening to patients' hopes, their fears, and their beliefs and to incorporate these beliefs into the therapeutic plan [42]. This careful listening is a first step toward understanding and subsequently toward an accurate diagnosis of a patient's ability to relate to contingency. A proper diagnosis is a precondition for good counseling in dealing with a possible interpretation crisis. This is especially important when it comes to a severe interpretation crisis [43]. Unmet spiritual needs can lead to depression and a reduced sense of spiritual meaning and peace [44]. It is important to first recognize spiritual needs and to then understand those spiritual needs in all their forms and appearances.

In contrast to Wuchterl, who reserved much space for the description of “denial,” we found indications of this mode of relating to contingency in only two interviews. This discrepancy can have different explanations. First, our study only looked at the life event of having incurable cancer. In other cases, patients might be more inclined to ignore the contingency than in the case of our major event. Second, people who tend to ignore contingency might not be the people who are most likely to participate in studies on talking about their lives [45]. Therefore, the numbers in our study indicating the four different modes should not be used to draw conclusions about more general circumstances. Future studies in different patient populations and examining other life events could enhance our findings.

It should be noted that an interview fragment only represents one particular moment during which the patient reflected on his or her experiences of contingency. Therefore, our findings should not be understood as fixed states, but as modes between which patients can pass back and forth. The different modes may necessitate different approaches to spiritual care. For instance, patients in the mode of denying contingency are more likely to be resistant to the kind of help that focuses on the meaning of a life event in their lives, as they do not recognize this line of thinking. In contrast, patients who are in the mode of receiving are less likely to benefit from help that gently tries to allow the patient to see that the event can have implications for their lives, as the patient has already discovered a new reality and new possibilities resulting from the event.

Our finding of four different ways of relating to contingency gives insight into where a patient can be in terms of relating to existential questions and affords an opportunity to understand the questions that may arise in the different modes. However, this is just the first step in understanding the experience of contingency in advanced cancer patients. We do not yet fully understand the relationship between the different modes, and we do not know whether patients can go through different modes and the direct implications for spiritual care.

Future research is needed to investigate whether these different modes also correlate with the overall wellbeing of patients. Other studies have shown that negative religious coping is associated with poorer quality of life [46, 47], that existential and spiritual domains are related to suffering and quality of life [48], and that spiritual interventions addressing existential themes using a narrative approach can enhance quality of life [34]. Therefore, in addressing spirituality, we believe that an awareness of the contingency of life should gain more attention and be employed as a basic understanding when considering life itself.

Furthermore, it is important to examine at what moment in the course of their disease that spiritual care can best be offered to cancer patients. Patients believe that professionals should know when and where to discuss spiritual concerns; however, much is still unknown about the timing of spiritual care [49]. Crucial to well-timed spiritual care is timely referral, which can be done by all healthcare professionals but is primarily done by the nursing staff, as they spend the most time with patients [50]. Spiritual care is generally seen as a domain of palliative and hospice care, but because patients need time to open up, rethink, and reshape their life stories, it might be argued that meeting with a spiritual care provider before the terminal phase is desirable [14, 49]. Therefore, the recommendations of the Spiritual Care Consensus Conference should be taken into account: patients should receive a simple and time-efficient spiritual screening at the point of entry into the healthcare system and be provided with appropriate referrals as needed [51]. Taking a spiritual history can be the first step in identifying potential spiritual issues and assessing the best time for referral to a board-certified chaplain [52]. However, to the best of our knowledge, no evidence-based research exists on the timing of spiritual care.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The results of our study stem from interviews conducted during a multicenter study involving academic as well as peripheral hospitals, which improves the generalizability of our results compared to single-center studies. Also, the sample size of 45 interviews increases the trustworthiness of our results compared to studies with smaller samples [53]. Nevertheless, the usability of our study is limited by its national context; a cross-cultural validation study is needed. Further qualitative research in other patient populations could provide more depth and a broader scope for our results. In addition, quantitative research could enrich our findings by examining whether these categories are related to patients' overall wellbeing and their self-reported spiritual wellbeing. Our findings were constrained by our patient population of advanced cancer patients, as well as by its focus on the life event of having cancer. In a different patient population or without the focus on the life event of having incurable cancer, this study could potentially have yielded different results.

In conclusion, if we want to improve spiritual care in the healthcare setting, we must understand the existential needs and experiences of these patients. Our study provides insight into the essence of the experiences of advanced cancer patients by testing theoretical notions in practice.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors hereby affirm that they have no other conflicts of interests to declare.

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