

## Long-Term Survivors of Breast Cancer: Religious Influence

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Received date: Aug 20, 2015; Accepted date: Jan 21, 2016; Published date: Jan 29, 2016

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### Abstract

Every year, approximately 1.38 million people are diagnosed with breast cancer, worldwide. Previous studies have shown that religiosity is crucial for the health and quality of life of cancer patients. This study explored religious faith associated with the recovery experience of women who survived breast cancer for more than five years without recurrence. A qualitative methodology was used and in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were audio-taped. Data were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. Data were saturated after interviewing 10 breast cancer survivors, mostly Buddhists. Four common themes were developed: peace of mind, *obey God's will*, religious social support, and being grateful. The findings of this study revealed crucial suggestions for healthcare professionals and providers of follow-up care in services for breast cancer survivors.

**Keywords:** Breast cancer survivors; Religious

### Introduction

Statistics indicate that the number of breast cancer patients has been increasing each year. Additionally, medical improvements have increased the survival rate of breast cancer patients. Thus, in this study, a qualitative method was used to examine breast cancer survivors who maintained their religion and survived for at least five years. This study was designed to understand the influence of religion on breast cancer survivors. The results are expected to provide a reference for other breast cancer patients.

According to statistics from 2004 to 2010 in the United States, the five-year relative breast cancer survival rate was 89.2%, and it has continued to increase each year [1]. A previous report showed that the relative cancer survival rates were higher than 75% in several countries [2]. Cancer patients experience physical pain and symptoms. The side effects of cancer treatment include depression, anxiety, and insomnia [3,4]. Religion can help cancer patients adjust to stress. Morgan et al. described that breast cancer patients relied on prayers to gain spiritual strength to deal with their daily lives [5].

Gaston-Johansson et al. examined coping capacity, spiritual well-being, and positive and negative religious coping among breast cancer patients [6]. Their results showed that the higher use of coping self-statements was associated with a higher level of spiritual well-being. Tate reviewed 13 qualitative and quantitative studies that have discussed how spirituality was used to cope with breast cancer. Spirituality was found to be the primary coping instrument used during all phases of cancer [7].

Understanding the religious influence on breast cancer survivors is critical. This influence reduces stress, depression, and improves the quality of sleep. In addition, it is crucial to breast cancer survivors because it can reduce the rate of cancer recurrence and increase their spiritual well-being.

### Materials and Method

The present qualitative study aimed to describe the influence of religion on breast cancer survivors. Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted to present many perspectives of cancer survivors, which can be useful to other breast cancer patients.

### Sampling

This study was conducted in Taiwan using purposive sampling, by selecting participants with the following characteristics: (1) survival of at least five years after breast cancer diagnosis, (2) an ability to express their religious experience in Mandarin or Taiwanese, (3) provision of a signed and completed letter of consent, and (4) permitting recording of the interview. Before conducting interviews, the investigator described the purpose of the study to the patients, and they signed the letter of consent. The research proposal was approved by the ethics committee of the Institutional Review Board of a hospital.

### Procedure and analysis

Data collection was based on the information of the patients and obtained from semi-structured interviews. Two experts assessed the interviews for perspicuity and consistency. The following questions were included in the interview: (a) Would you please talk about your experience of religious influence? (b) Would you please talk about your feelings toward religious influence during recovery? (c) What religious approaches did you use during recovery, and why did you use those approaches? (d) Is there anything else that you want to share with us?

The interview lasted for approximately 60-120 min. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. The use of Newell and Burnard's content analysis methodology successfully facilitated the identification of themes, subthemes, and concepts [8]. The investigators ensured the qualitative rigor of the study by establishing the credibility, auditability, confirmability, and fittingness [9].

This study was conducted by the researcher who conducted the interviews, who possesses several years of clinical experience and has completed an advanced qualitative research course. The transcribed interviews were analyzed by the two authors of this article, who are experienced in qualitative research methods and analysis.

## Results

### Characteristics of participants

Data saturation was observed after interviewing 10 patients. The average age of the participants was 52.7 years (the range was 36-70 years) and the average time since the initial diagnosis was 8.7 years. The major themes that appeared in this study were peace of mind, positive thinking, religious social support, and being grateful.

### Peace of mind

Patients diagnosed with breast cancer face substantial physical and psychological pressure. They may use a religious approach to maintain a peace of mind. They may use religion to not only confront the disease but also to maintain inner peace.

### The spiritual power

Religion is a source of unlimited power for the breast cancer patients. Their minds are full of spiritual power that provides them peace of mind and strengthens their faith.

*"Worshipping the Buddha recharged me spiritual energy, giving me calm and a peace of mind. We trust all in the Buddha when praying." (Participant F)*

*"We chant for the Buddha at the temple! The temple gives me a feeling of sustenance, a power that faith can produce. There is no doubt in the power. If I feel bad, I would recite and let my heart calm down." (Participant D)*

### Feeling of peace

Reciting Buddhist scriptures or the Bible provides inner peace for patients to connect their thoughts with God or Buddha. Religion helped the breast cancer patients experience peace.

*"For people who recite Buddhist scriptures every morning and night, their hearts are very stable. Simply because they are Buddhists, they are not like broken kite lines. Every day when I come home and turn on the light, the first thing I do is to offer incense to the Buddha; my heart then feels safe." (Participant C)*

*"My friend sent me Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist scriptures gave me spiritual sustenance. I felt that the Buddha had been protecting me. The Buddha blesses; I read during every chemotherapy session. I always bring Buddhist scriptures to the hospital. I felt hope and more confident." (Participant G)*

### Obey God's will

Breast cancer patients believe they must not only accept surgery and chemotherapy but also face death on their own. *Chemotherapy is a painful procedure that causes sorrow among breast cancer patients. Religious beliefs allow them to rethink the disease. God told them to think positively to face breast cancer.*

### Reflection and confrontation

*God expects me to listen to the voice from my body, to reflect repeatedly, to face the illness courageously, and to conquer difficulties.*

*"I was shocked when I was diagnosed with breast cancer and found it difficult to accept. Why me? Then, I sought help from Avalokitesvar. I think that Buddha expects me to not be too tired, and wants me to reflect on myself and adjust with my body." (Participant E)*

*"A female priest told me that this is the will of God and that I must obey. Through God, this thing makes me reflect; listen to the voice of my body, and to avoid having a busy day. What happened to my body? I must face the disease and adjust favorably to life to overcome it." (Participant A)*

### Cherishing my own body

The breast cancer patients stated that we should cherish what God gave us, cherish our own body, and not to push ourselves so hard.

*"God made me more appreciative of the body and be more appreciative of what God has given us. A lot of things I cannot do; let it go. God will deal with it the best. Do not carry a heavy burden, so that a favorable physical and spiritual state is maintained." (Participant B)*

*"I am mad on being diagnosed with breast cancer. I did not err. I often ask Buddha why I got breast cancer. How many trials on earth should I experience? I had been depressed for a long time, and unhappy. Finally, I realized Buddha's will. He expected me to rest well and cherishes my own body." (Participant C)*

### Religious social support

Some participants said that many of their religious friends supported them. The friends always said words, prayers, or chants that encouraged the patients, and brought food, providing a warm feeling to the patients when they were sick.

### Encouragement and support from the fellowship

The breast cancer patients stated that the fellowship always encouraged and support them, which warmed their hearts.

*"I have many friends at the church. When I was sick they looked at me every day. The congregation bowed their heads in prayer. After chemotherapy, I went to church, and they continued to support me, giving me great comfort. They always encouraged me and gave me a lot of help." (Participant H)*

*"It was difficult to endure the pain for the first few days after I returned from the hospital. My Buddhist friends told me that I must maintain confidence; the Buddha will bless you and enable you to overcome this difficulty." (Participant G)*

### Fellowships' company

They need the fellowships' company while reciting the Buddhist scriptures. This provided them religious support.

*"Buddhist friends came to the hospital every morning, recited with me, brought me soup, and went home at night." (Participant C)*

### Being grateful

Some participants thought that they should be thankful to God, the Buddha, and everyone. Surgery and treatment after cancer diagnosis

are difficult. The participants thanked many people for their help and care during the treatment.

*“Master wants us to learn thanksgiving. When we are grateful for the care of others, we begin to thank others.” (Participant G).*

*“Thanks to God for providing me faith and hope to endure the most difficult period of operation and chemotherapy. God helps me go through this smoothly.” (Participant B)”*

## Discussion

The results of this study showed the influence of religion on breast cancer survivors. It involved the following: peace of mind, *Obey God's will*, religious social support, and being grateful. Therefore, religion has a major influence on breast cancer survivors. Medical staff should provide this information to breast cancer survivors and encourage them to find more religious and spiritual support.

The participants in this study used religious belief to adapt and be calm. These results are similar to those reported by previous studies [6,7]. During chemotherapy, participants experienced discomfort. They adopted *Obey God's will*, which is consistent with a previous study [6]. Patients experienced weakness and fear after being diagnosed with breast cancer; such patients needed more support and reassurance from religious friends, which is consistent with a previous study [6]. Breast cancer patients need more religious and spiritual support. The results showed breast cancer patients experienced physical discomfort and symptoms. Religion can help breast cancer patients adjust to pressure. This result is similar to the reported by previous study [5]. Breast cancer patients depend on prayers to gain spiritual power. Religion provides them faith and hope, and helps them go through the most difficult stage. Thus, it is important for them to look for religious support. In addition, religion was a means for breast cancer survivors to cope with their sickness. Breast cancer survivors prayed, which is consistent with a previous study [10]. Our findings have crucial implications. The results of this study can be shared with other breast cancer survivors.

Through research, we found that when the patient was diagnosed with breast cancer. They often have grief reactions. They need to face the helplessness and pain treatment. If medical personnel can provide religious care. By religion, it will be able to accompany the patient through the treatment of breast cancer hardships, but also to alleviate the suffering of the patients. It recommends that hospitals set up

religious support groups. The support groups can be available with religious support to patients at any time.

## Conclusion

Patients shared their stories of the influence of religion. They adopted a religion, which allowed them to achieve peace of mind. Despite the discomfort involved with chemotherapy, the breast cancer survivors always engaged in positive thinking and used religious social support to reduce their pain. Therefore, religion has a major influence on breast cancer survivors.

## Acknowledgement

We acknowledge all the participants in this study for kindly helping us in this research.

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