

“I am a complete woman”: Dragon boat and breast cancer survival

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I AM A COMPLETE WOMAN: DRAGON BOAT AND BREAST CANCER SURVIVAL

KEYWORDS: Breast cancer, dragon boat, Post-Traumatic Growth, focus group discussion, thematic analysis

ABSTRACT: Being diagnosed with breast cancer is like receiving a death sentence. While some surrender to their fate with diminished meaning of life, others manage to accept the challenges of their condition and move on with greater appreciation of life. This qualitative study examined the experiences of breast cancer survivors whose engagement with dragon boat enhanced their quality of life despite the traumatic discovery, treatment and long-term effects resulting from the illness. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with three Filipina survivors of breast cancer who were actively engaged in dragon boat paddling. The in-depth discussion among the participants provided rich data on their survival of breast cancer and how dragon boat provided them physical and psychosocial benefits. Thematic analysis of the transcription data from the FGD yielded the following themes: (1) *family as source of strength*, (2) *acceptance of breast cancer*, (3) *mutually supporting relationships*, (4) *increased personal strengths*, (5) *greater appreciation of life* and (5) *I Am a Complete Woman*. Results were discussed within the framework of the Post-Traumatic Growth model (Schaefer and Moos, 1998).

Breast cancer is the leading cause of death by cancer among women worldwide (American Cancer Society, 2015). Being diagnosed with breast cancer is almost tantamount to receiving a death sentence, thus, discovering that one has this life-threatening illness can be a traumatic event. This challenging process of living with breast cancer represents a major psychosocial transition for most patients, producing both positive and negative outcomes (Cordova, et al., 2001).

This positive change after a traumatic event, such as a breast cancer survivorship, is referred to as Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), with the survivor experiencing changes that go beyond the pre-trauma adjustment level arising from the struggle with a major life crisis (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). The theoretical model of PTG as framed by Schaefer and Moos (1998) predicts growth when there is a “successful outcome in the face of poor prognosis.” In this qualitative study, the experiences of three Filipino breast cancer survivors engaging in dragon boat were examined from the lens of the Post-Traumatic Growth model (Schaefer and Moos, 1998). More specifically, this research study sought to understand the experiences of breast cancer survivors who participate in dragon boat and gain insight on how

they made sense of their survivorship and engagement with the sport.

Method

Participants

Three women survivors of breast cancer who participated in dragon boat paddling took part in a focus group discussion (FGD) facilitated by a psychologist who was not previously associated with the women. Initial investigation of potential participants for this study yielded only a total of five breast cancer survivors in the country who participate in dragon boat. However, only three of them were in the Philippines at the time of the study and all of them agreed to participate in this study. The informed consent, which assured them of utmost confidentiality in the treatment of data and reporting of results, included their permission to record of entire FGD and publication of the study.

One participant, a 56-year old married woman and mother of four boys, had undergone chemotherapy and radical mastectomy, survived breast cancer for 17 years, and had been dragon boat paddling for 11 years at the time of this study.

Another participant, a 64-year old single mother, had undergone chemotherapy, radiation and radical mastectomy, survived breast cancer for 13 years, and had been dragon boat paddling for eight years at the time of this study. The third participant, a 47-year old single lady, had undergone chemotherapy and breast operation, survived breast cancer for eight years, and had been dragon boat paddling for five years.

Procedure

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was employed to explore the complex phenomenon (Kitzinger, 1994) of dragon boat paddling among breast cancer survivors. A two-hour FGD was conducted in a small coffee shop where the women engaged in a casual exchange of experiences. After brief self-introductions, the facilitator initiated the discussion by asking the women to tell their stories about their common experiences with breast cancer and dragon boat. A climate of openness and spontaneity prevailed throughout the FGD, allowing the women to disclose much of themselves without experiencing an intrusion to their private lives. Tears and laughter were spontaneously expressed as the women narrated their challenges. They all lingered in the coffee shop long after the end of the FGD and expressed how much they enjoyed the process.

Data analysis

To analyze the data from the FGD transcriptions, thematic analysis was conducted. After separately reviewing the transcriptions for coding, the two researchers got together to validate their codes, consolidate their findings and negotiate the theme names that would characterize the data. After thorough scrutiny and exhaustive discussion, consensus was reached on the theme names, description and supporting quotations from the original text. These were eventually presented to the participants to allow them to confirm, contest or clarify the findings of the researchers.

Results

Six themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the FGD transcription data, namely: *family as source of strength*, *acceptance of breast cancer*, *mutually supporting relationships*, *increased personal strength*, *greater appreciation of life*, and *I Am a Complete Woman*.

Family as a source of strength. This theme referred to patterns from the data ascribing to the family their ability to surmount the challenges of breast cancer. All three women admitted that they were shocked and grieved upon knowing of their breast cancer, however, the unwavering support and encouragement from their parents, siblings, spouses or children motivated them to get well. “The thought of my four young boys kept me going. I have to get well for them.” “My mother stood by me, she helped me through it all.” Knowing that their families needed them and valued their lives strengthened their desire to overcome the illness. Their family also encouraged and supported their decision to engage in dragon boat after they were cleared by their doctors to “lead a normal life.”

Acceptance of breast cancer. The repeated allusion to the early acceptance of breast cancer confirmed this theme. All three survivors asserted that it helped that they accepted their situation shortly after the diagnosis, allowing them to move forward to start the long process of treatment. This early acknowledgement of their condition allowed them to focus on what they could do to get well, rather than on what they could no longer do as a result of the illness. “I cried . . . but I accepted it right away.” According to the women, “Those who have a hard time accepting their condition take longer to heal or they do not heal at all because they eventually lose hope and die.” This same acceptance also convinced them to participate in dragon boat, recognizing that the sport would facilitate their lifelong health and wellness.

Mutually supporting relationships. Social support also surfaced as a recurring theme in their continued healing process. They recognized the importance of support from others and the support that they could give others as well. “When we get in the boat, we are all the same. It does not matter if you have breast cancer or not.” That they were not given special treatment as breast cancer survivors during training and competition even strengthened their confidence that they could do what others can despite their physical limitation. On the other hand, fellow paddlers drew inspiration from them as they trained without any special treatment. “When they find out that we survived breast cancer, they are challenged to exert more effort, because they no longer have reason to complain about the hard training and difficult competition!”

Increased personal strength. This theme surfaced from statements of the participants affirming their increased sense of physical and psychological strength. Overcoming the initial difficulty of training for dragon boat reminded them of how they first responded when they discovered they had breast cancer. “It’s just painful at the start, just like receiving the news about breast cancer. There’s pain in the beginning, but if you accept it, the fear will disappear and then you will have hope.” Thus, their survival of breast cancer reminded them of their personal strength to overcome difficulty, allowing them to prevail over the physical pains and tests of endurance that are characteristic of training the body, learning how to paddle and competing in a team. Additionally, their participation in dragon boat also became their platform to promote breast cancer awareness and the importance of staying physically active despite the tendency to limit movement as a result of the illness.

Greater appreciation of life. On hindsight, they all agreed that breast cancer was a “blessing in disguise” and that the good things that happened to them as a result of the illness far outweigh what they had to endure to get well. Thus, this theme related to expressions of gratitude in life “despite” and “because” of breast cancer. One participant even remarked, “Life is beautiful!” In reference to their engagement with dragon boat, they also articulated how thankful they are for the joy of discovering the sport and the opportunity to inspire other paddlers who did not have to suffer breast cancer. Thus, a sense of purpose also emerged from their experience with dragon boat as they saw themselves encouraging others to overcome their own trials. “God has a purpose in all these” was a common expression among the participants.

“I am a complete woman.” A dominant theme that surfaced throughout the FGD was the assertion that the women felt “complete” despite losing one breast to cancer. This conviction was further highlighted in their experience of dragon boat that revealed how, apart from participating in this very difficult sport, they even outperformed their younger teammates who had complete body parts. This was well articulated by a participant who declared, “I do not feel incomplete. Nothing is missing in me. In fact, something was added to me as a result of breast cancer. I gained strength and trust in myself.” Another remarked, “Life can be better after breast cancer” while the other asserted, “I did not get a new life. I got a better life.”

Discussion

The themes that emerged from thorough scrutiny of the data reveal a profound experience of personal growth after breast cancer that was deeply intertwined with dragon boat paddling. The six themes of “family as source of strength,” “acceptance of breast cancer,” “mutually supporting relationships,” “increased personal strengths,” “greater appreciation of life” and “I Am a Complete Woman” characterized the complex phenomenon of breast cancer survival and dragon boat.

In their PTG model, Schaefer and Moos (1998) explained that environmental and personal factors influence the development of posttraumatic growth, namely, a greater appreciation for life, realization of new possibilities, more intimate relations with others, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual change (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). These factors surfaced in the themes that characterized the experiences of the women survivors of breast cancer. Instead of suffering a dramatic decrease in their quality of life after diagnosis and treatment, the three participants in this study disclosed that they enjoyed more fulfilling lives than they did prior to the illness, emphasizing the importance of dragon boat in the promotion of their personal, social and spiritual growth.

Results from this qualitative study were consistent with findings from previous research showing patterns of high social support from dragon boat as related to positive psychological growth (Sabiston, McDonough and Crocker, 2007). This study also affirmed earlier findings on breast cancer survivors promoting breast cancer awareness through dragon boat (McDonough, et al., 2011; Sabiston, et al., 2007; McKenzie, 1998). Furthermore, this study confirmed physical activity and exercise as viable prescriptions following cancer treatment because, aside from mitigating the physical and psychological challenges associated with the illness, it ultimately contributes to improvements in quality of life (Bicego, et al., 2009, Harris, 2012; Hayes, et al., 2009; Vallance, et al., 2008).

However, given the limited number of participants in this qualitative study, further research involving a bigger sample size of breast cancer survivors engaging in dragon boat is recommended to reinforce the claims made by this study. Additionally, prospective data may be collected to provide the basis for comparing growth experiences before and after engagement with dragon boat among breast cancer survivors. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provided greater

insight into the experience of breast cancer survival and how meaningful participation in a physical activity such as dragon boat can result in improved quality of life despite the traumatic experience of a life-threatening illness such as breast cancer. The

journey of a breast cancer patient does not simply end when treatment has been completed. Understanding the reality of cancer survivorship and its consequences on quality of life is important to successful cancer care management.

“SOY UNA MUJER COMPLETA”: EL BOTE DRAGÓN Y LA SUPERVIVENCIA DEL CÁNCER DE MAMA

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cáncer de mama, barco dragón, crecimiento post-traumático, discusión en grupo focal, análisis temático.

RESUMEN: Recibir el diagnóstico de cáncer de mama es como recibir una sentencia de muerte. Mientras algunas personas se rinden a su destino con el sentido de vida disminuido, otras logran aceptar los desafíos de su condición y seguir adelante con una mayor apreciación de la vida. Este estudio cualitativo examinó las experiencias de supervivientes de cáncer de mama cuyo compromiso con el barco dragón mejoró su calidad de vida a pesar del descubrimiento traumático, el tratamiento y los efectos a largo plazo derivados de la enfermedad. Se llevó a cabo una discusión de grupo de enfoque con tres supervivientes de cáncer de mama filipinos que participaron activamente en el remo de barco dragón. La discusión en profundidad entre los participantes proporcionó datos enriquecedores sobre su supervivencia al cáncer de mama y cómo el barco dragón les proporcionó beneficios físicos y psicosociales. El análisis temático de los datos de transcritos de la discusión de grupo de enfoque produjo los siguientes temas: (1) la familia como fuente de fuerza, (2) la aceptación del cáncer de mama, (3) las relaciones de apoyo mutuo, (4) fortalezas personales aumentadas, (5) mayor apreciación de la vida y (5) soy una mujer completa. Los resultados se discutieron en el marco del modelo de crecimiento post-traumático (Schaefer y Moos, 1998).

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