

THE ROLE OF DRAGON BOAT PADDLING IN FACILITATING POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH AMONG BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS

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Physical activity positively influences physical, psychological and social challenges faced by breast cancer survivors (e.g. Courneya et al., 2002; McKenzie, 1998). One limitation in the literature examining psychological benefits is the broad focus on quality of life, with little theoretical basis and a common focus on negative outcomes. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) post-traumatic growth (PTG) model provides a framework to explain how struggling with highly distressing incidents such as breast cancer involves a process of self-disclosure, social support, distress management, and schema change that can lead to five aspects of positive psychological growth: (1) relating to others, (2) new possibilities, (3) personal strength, (4) spiritual change, and (5) appreciation of life. The purpose of the current study was to examine the role that participating in dragon boat played in facilitating the PTG process among breast cancer survivors.

Twenty women in at least their second year of participating in a dragon boat program for breast cancer survivors volunteered for this study. The women ranged in age from 42 to 70 years ($M = 58.69$, $SD = 6.85$) and had participated in dragon boating for 2 to 8 years. Each woman participated in one 45-60 minute semi-structured interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and content analysis was guided by PTG theory.

All of the women in the study had experienced breast cancer as significantly challenging and incongruent with their previous expectations for their lives. Dragon boat participation played a role in providing opportunities for disclosure, social support, reducing emotional distress, self-schema change, and regaining a sense of control. The opportunity to interact with a community of survivors was important for self-disclosure and social support. The focus on physical goals, a shared sense of accomplishment and challenge, and novel environment contributed to reducing distress. Schema change was facilitated through perceived changes in fitness, competence, athletic identity, competitiveness, and interest in other activities. Although it was not a feature in the PTG model, demonstrating or regaining a sense of personal control via dragon boating was an important part of developing a sense of self post-treatment for many women. Dragon boat facilitated four dimensions of PTG: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, and appreciation of life. It also provided a constant reminder of having had the disease, which was associated with a degree of distress for many women. While that reminder was part of an ongoing struggle for many, this continued distress was also an important facilitator to experiencing positive psychological growth.

This study demonstrated how participating in a novel physical activity program within a community of breast cancer survivors can facilitate positive psychological growth following breast cancer. It highlights the importance of social support from other survivors and having opportunities to become athletes and achieve physically in this process, which can inform future research on physical activity interventions within the context of overcoming a significant health challenge such as breast cancer.