

Paddling through waves of challenges and threats: Examining enduring stressors unique to breast cancer survivors involved in a dragon boat program.

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Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in Canadian women. With diagnostic and treatment advances, and survival rates approaching 80%, there is a recent emphasis on strategies to enhance survivors' lives. It is thought that stress and anxiety involved in breast cancer diagnosis, treatments, and ultimately medical clearance and remission can have significant influences on women's lives as survivors. According to Lazarus (1993), understanding the stress and coping process associated with cancer requires identification of the unique and immediate stressors rather than a broadened focus on the overall illness. Limited research exists that identifies key enduring stressors associated with the experience of being a breast cancer survivor. The purpose of this research study was to identify and better understand the stressors that influence the breast cancer experience post-treatment in a unique population of dragon boat paddlers. Specifically, we were interested in examining common stressors associated with breast cancer and how participating in a dragon boat program (i.e., regular exercise) affects the stress process. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of stressors reported by this population, we conducted a 75-minute semi-structured focus group with ten breast cancer survivor dragon boat paddlers. The research was grounded in a stress and coping theoretical framework (Lazarus, 1999) to examine both challenge (positive) and threat/harm (negative) perspectives.

Women reported a variety of stressors, frequency of influence, and both positive and negative emotions associated with the experience of enduring stress. The stressors included physical, psychological, social, and spiritual manifestations. Some of the common stressors reported by women included fear of recurrence, concern for healthy choices (i.e., diet, physical activity), changes in relationships with others, financial difficulties, side effects from medication and treatment, physical and mental body-related changes, feelings of uncertainty, personal control, and dragon boat paddling. As a result of this research, a list of 33 stressors unique to breast cancer survivors was developed. The findings from this focus group were then used to develop a quantitative instrument targeting the stress discourse of breast cancer survivors. The greater understanding of stressors unique to this population has also assisted in the preliminary conceptualization and modification of a model of breast cancer survivorship.

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