

Exploring the Experience of Breast Cancer Patients:

A Qualitative Study Using Expressive Writing

Sofia Paiva Cabral¹, Catarina Ramos²; Pedro Alexandre Costa³; Isabel Leal³

¹ISPA-Instituto Universitário; Lisbon, Portugal [email: sofiampc97@gmail.com]; ²LabPSI, Centro de Investigação Interdisciplinar Egas Moniz, Instituto Universitário Egas Moniz; Almada, Portugal; ³WJCR – William James Center for Research, ISPA – Instituto Universitário; Lisbon, Portugal

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of using the expressive writing in the experience of women with breast cancer. The main objectives of the current study are to understand, through qualitative analysis, the subjective experiences of these women; to explore the emotional and cognitive content that is present in the individual experience; to ascertain the subjective experience of post-traumatic growth (PTG) that might be present in the accounts of the experience.

Method: This is a qualitative study using a thematic analysis with bottom-up method. The sample consists of 59 women ($M_{age} = 52,46$; $DP = 8,74$) who have written their experiences with breast cancer, within the scope of the expressive writing technique that was applied during a group intervention to facilitate PTG. The participants were users of the Oncology Units of some hospitals in Greater Lisbon and Oporto, Portugal.

Results: The reactions to the experience of cancer are exactly related to the **three different phases**:

1) Experiencing breast cancer	subjective breast cancer experience
2) Reflection of the impact of cancer	integration of the cancer experience into the life narrative
3) Before and after cancer	reflection on the gains and losses that were obtained during the breast cancer process

In **phase 3** it is possible to find reports of **PTG**. It is possible to conclude, through the qualitative analysis, that the **reactions to the experience of cancer are not exactly related to each of the stages of breast cancer nor determined by the chronological factor, but by the different stages of understanding the disease.**

Conclusion and Clinical Implications: This qualitative study allowed us to understand that the stages of the disease are more associated with the subjective experience of cancer than with the different treatments and the results allow the three stages of the disease to be considered at the level of psycho-oncological intervention and reinforce the existence of PTG in women with breast cancer. An approach more focused on the individual experience of each woman is suggested to be applied within multidisciplinary interventions.