

# The Significance of Motherhood for Adolescents Whose Mothers Have Breast Cancer

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**O**f the almost 200,000 women newly diagnosed with breast cancer each year (Jemal et al., 2009), many have adolescent children. Although the effect of breast cancer on women and their spouses has been well researched (Hoskins & Haber, 2000; Lewis, Hammond, & Woods, 1993; Northouse, Templin, Mood, & Oberst, 1998; Pasacreta, McCorkle, & Margolis, 1990), research that focuses on how adolescent children cope with maternal disease is just starting to emerge (Edwards et al., 2008; Kristjanson, Chalmers, & Woodgate, 2004; Lewis, 2004).

The potential burden of living with a mother's cancer diagnosis and treatments (Behar, 1999; Compas et al., 1994; Compas, Worsham, Ey, & Howell, 1996; Lewis & Hammond, 1996), her potential loss (Conway, 1995), and the need to assume caregiver responsibilities for the family (Gates & Lackey, 1998; Hilton & Elfert, 1996) may be stressful and potentially devastating for adolescents. Many question their own and their mothers' mortality (Barnes et al., 2002; Issel, Ersek, & Lewis, 1990; Kristjanson et al., 2004; Rauch, Muriel, & Cassem, 2002). Although most women speak to their spouses about their disease, they may have difficulty communicating with their children (Barnes et al.; Behar; Shands, Lewis, & Zahlis, 2000). Worries about their mother and, for girls, about getting the disease themselves (Issel et al.; Lichtman et al., 1984), have been identified. Although adolescent sons report anxiety about their mothers' diagnosis of breast cancer (Hilton & Elfert), adolescent daughters report a higher level of stress-response symptoms, including anxiety and depression (Compas et al., 1996). Adolescent children generally feel torn between their own needs and those of their mother at a time when they are striving for individuation and separation (Armsden & Lewis, 1993; Nelson, Sloper, Charlton, & While, 1994). A limited knowledge base is available regarding the experiences of adolescents from their perspectives in comprehending how their lives are affected (Lewis, 1996; Quinn-Beers, 2001; Zahlis, 2001). Lewis (1998, 2004), in reviewing more than 25 years of research on the effect of breast cancer on families, has concluded that additional research from an interpretive

**Purpose/Objectives:** To describe adolescents' experiences of living with mothers with breast cancer.

**Research Approach:** Qualitative.

**Setting:** Northeastern United States.

**Participants:** 11 adolescents aged 13–19 years whose mothers were diagnosed with breast cancer within a year prior to the study.

**Methodologic Approach:** With Van Manen's phenomenologic interpretive paradigm, multiple levels of analysis of transcribed semistructured interviews yielded common themes and a unique account and understanding of adolescents' lives when their mothers have breast cancer.

**Main Research Variables:** Adolescent coping and maternal breast cancer.

**Findings:** Five distinct themes were identified: life changed, turning to self, learning to be with my mother, needing to normalize, and speaking openly—the importance of communication. Study findings uncovered the powerful role mothers held in the adolescents' lives.

**Conclusions:** The depth of the feelings and conflicts expressed by the adolescent participants, who appeared to be coping with their mothers' breast cancer, emphasizes the need to explore coping responses used in adolescent adjustment to maternal breast cancer. Given that all the adolescents reported some level of anxiety and conflict in their lives, further research should address factors that underlie their coping mechanisms.

**Interpretation:** Study findings and insights underscore the significance of the maternal-adolescent relationship. Healthcare professionals need to ask more directed questions and develop interviewing and counseling skills to support mothers through this difficult illness. Adolescent children require support and guidance in coping with their mothers' breast cancer journey.

paradigm is needed to better understand how adolescents' lives are affected. The purpose of the current study was to describe the experience of adolescents living with and communicating about their mothers' breast cancer.

## Methods

This qualitative study was guided by Van Manen's (1990) phenomenologic interpretive paradigm, which is