I’m Still Mom: Young Mothers Living With Advanced Breast Cancer

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Receiving a cancer diagnosis has a tremendous effect on the function of families and parental roles, responsibilities, and abilities. In 2010, Weaver et al. conducted the first published population-based survey of cancer survivors with children and estimated that, at that time, 1.5 million adult cancer survivors with approximately 2.85 million dependent children were living in the United States. Of the adult cancer survivors with dependent children, 46% were aged 18–39 years (Weaver et al., 2010).

For adults with dependent children, parenting is a major focus of everyday life. A parental diagnosis of cancer and its treatment affect all areas of family life and may have long-term implications for dependent children. Previous research has demonstrated that parents with cancer report significant concerns about how illness-related changes in mood, cognition, physical function, and family routines may have affected their children. A subset of women with advanced cancer are at higher risk for psychological distress and parental concerns (Muriel et al., 2012). In a study of widowed fathers, Park, Deal, Yopp, et al. (2016) found that mothers with advanced cancer at the end of life experienced increased worries about their families and decreased levels of peacefulness, with 38% of mothers not saying goodbye to their children and 26% not being at peace with dying. Additional studies of parents with advanced cancer suggest that primary concerns include being a good parent, worrying about children, adapting to a terminal diagnosis, and making decisions about treatment (Bell & Ristovski-Slijepcevic, 2011; Muriel et al., 2012; Nilsson et al., 2009; Öhlén & Holm, 2006; Park, Deal, Check, et al., 2016; Park, Deal, Yopp, et al., 2016; Park et al., 2017).

Other studies have focused on the impact of parental illness and death on children’s mental health and functioning (Park et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 1996; Swick & Rauch, 2006).

PURPOSE: To conduct a detailed content analysis of the theme “I’m still Mom” as described by young women living with advanced breast cancer.

PARTICIPANTS & SETTING: 12 young adult women living with advanced breast cancer were recruited from across the United States.

METHODOLOGIC APPROACH: van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenologic method was used to analyze qualitative data from interviews and establish subthemes.

FINDINGS: Women were a mean age of 36 years and had at least one child. The following three subthemes emerged from the overarching theme of I’m still Mom: (a) being Mom is hard, (b) time is short, and (c) it’s not easy for my kids.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING: This study provides a foundation for additional research that can inform family-centered education and interventions to help align the parenting priorities of this cohort of women, as well as optimize their quality of life.

KEYWORDS young women; advanced cancer; parenting; breast cancer; motherhood

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