

Facilitation of Self-Transcendence in a Breast Cancer Support Group: II

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Purpose/Objectives: To pilot a second support group intervention study promoting self-transcendence perspectives and activities and to document changes over time in well-being in support group participants compared with nonparticipants.

Design: Quasiexperimental, partial randomization, preference trial design.

Setting: An urban breast cancer resource center established by survivors.

Sample: 41 women with newly diagnosed breast cancer were recruited, and 39 completed the study. 22 women participated in three intervention support groups; 17 were in a comparison group.

Methods: The intervention was an eight-week, closed support group based on self-transcendence theory. Data were collected three times during 14 months.

Main Research Variables: Support group intervention, self-transcendence, and emotional and physical well-being.

Findings: The intervention group had lower scores than the comparison group on self-transcendence and well-being variables at baseline (time [T] 1). Scores were higher for both groups postintervention (T2), with no differences between groups. One year postintervention (T3), intervention group scores again were lower than comparison group scores. Intervention group T3 scores were unchanged from T2.

Conclusions: Most potential participants were unwilling to risk being randomized into a nonpreferred group. Activities based on self-transcendence theory were associated with expanded perspectives and activities and an improved sense of well-being in support group participants at the end of the intervention, but not one year later. Findings from the pilot studies informed a study currently in progress.

Implications for Nursing: Nurses should maintain awareness of local resources for support and make that information available to women when they are newly diagnosed with breast cancer, during their treatment, and later.

Key Points . . .

- Self-transcendence perspectives and behaviors are associated with a sense of well-being and mental health in studies of physically healthy people and people with life-threatening illnesses.
- Women with newly diagnosed breast cancer who maintain or develop self-transcendence perspectives and behaviors related to their diagnosis and treatment may report better physical and emotional well-being.
- Self-transcendence perspectives and behaviors may be facilitated in women newly diagnosed with breast cancer through peer support group activities that are based on self-transcendence theory.
- Findings from this pilot study indicate that women benefit from breast cancer peer support resources during their time of initial diagnosis and treatment and that they should be assessed for continuing need for similar resources post-treatment.

Theoretical Framework

The investigator's program of research is based on a self-transcendence theoretical framework described in the report of the first study (Coward, 1998). Self-transcendence refers to the capacity of people to reach out beyond personal concerns to take on broader life perspectives and activities. Reed (1991a, 1996) viewed self-transcendence as a developmental capacity realized and elaborated from experiences that confront people with mortality and immortality through the process of aging or through encounters with illness and loss. Pivotal life events, such as a cancer diagnosis, challenge people's previously held beliefs about themselves and their place in the world. Such events are potential turning points because choices made within the context of such events may have far-reaching consequences in terms of changed priorities and finding new purposes for life (Coward, 1997).

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This article describes a second pilot study of a support group for women newly diagnosed with breast cancer. The first study, a pre-experimental design, explored feasibility and patterns of effectiveness of a support group designed to facilitate self-transcendence perspectives and activities (Coward, 1998). Those findings were used to strengthen recruitment and retention procedures, enhance the intervention, and explore additional ways to assess intervention effectiveness. The primary purposes of the second study were to implement the intervention with a larger sample of women and to compare women participating in the intervention with women not participating. Findings from both pilot studies provided direction for a study currently in progress of 200 women newly diagnosed with breast cancer.