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

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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).

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.