



The Experience of Cognitive Change in Women With Breast Cancer following Chemotherapy

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Reports of cognitive change following chemotherapy cause concern. Research findings answer questions about impact on quality of life.

BACKGROUND

Change in cognitive abilities is a potential side effect of chemotherapy yet little is understood about its exact cause. In addition, research is limited that has explored the lived experience of the phenomenon and its impact on everyday life.



PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to uncover the meaning of cognitive change in women with breast cancer, how symptoms are experienced and become evident, how cognitive changes impact roles in personal and professional lives, and how women cope with these changes.

METHODS

Approval for use of human subjects was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Penn State Hershey Medical Center. Interpretive phenomenological methods were employed throughout data collection and analysis. Data collection included:

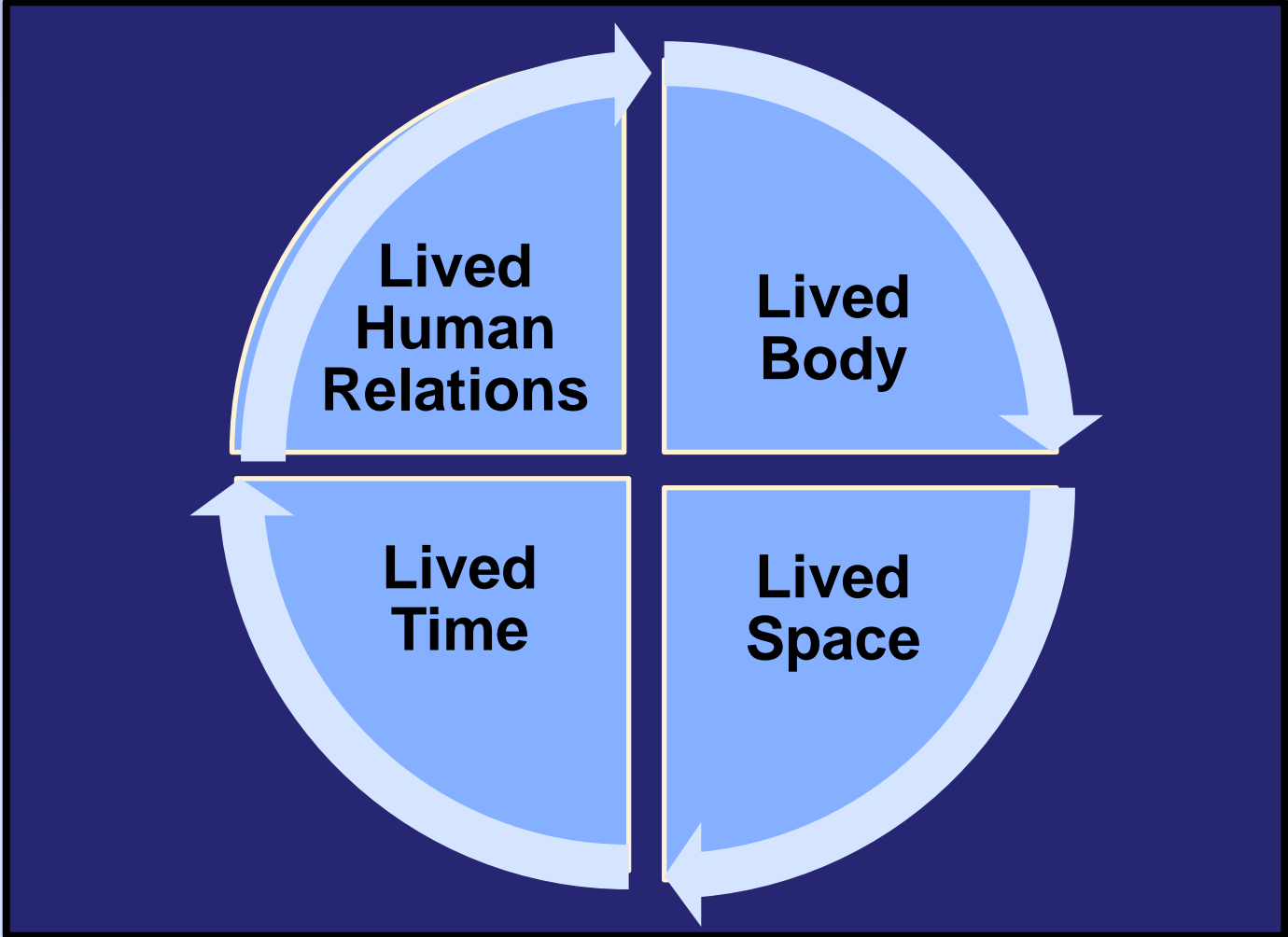
- Two in-depth semi-structured interviews that were held one month apart.
- Subjects maintained a written journal between interviews.

SAMPLE (N=7)

- All completed chemotherapy treatment within the past 12 months.
- All reported experiencing signs of cognitive change.
- Age range**, ‘42 to 59,’ median age 52.
- Race**: White 7
- Marital status**:
 - Married 4
 - Divorced 2
 - Widowed 1
- Employment status**:
 - Employed full time 5
 - Homemaker 1
 - Temporary disability 1
- Education**:
 - High School 1
 - Bachelors 3
 - Masters 2
 - PhD/MD 1

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Results are reported as essential themes that emerged from the data through thematic analysis. A team of faculty experts offered validation of thematic analysis. Essential themes were then described as they are woven into the lifeworld existentials of lived body, lived space, lived, time, and lived human relations (van Manen, 1990).



- “I feel like I’ve lost a thread of my life ...Like I’m having a hard time putting together tasks and that is the thing that really frustrates me.”
- “It’s difficult to concentrate...it’s hard for me to follow the conversation and so then I will hear something ...but I can’t repeat the topic back right away...”
- “I don’t take on big projects at home anymore because I can’t ...organize it in my mind.”
- “I would think ‘What’s going to happen to my career? I need my job.’”
- “...people keep saying ‘you look so good’, but I’m not good you know...”

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching the Lived Experience- Human Science for an Action Pedagogy*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Themes and subthemes

Essential Themes	Subthemes
Noticing the difference	Discovering that it is real
	Explaining to others
Experiencing cognitive changes	Finding the words
	Problems with memory
	Paying attention
	Concentration difficulties
	Organizing and prioritizing
Interacting socially	Fatigue
	Being a full participant
	Turning inward
	Overcoming one’s fears
	Changing priorities
Coping	Facing the challenges
	Finding support
	Strategies to compensate
Looking forward	Fear of sustaining symptoms
	Employment concerns

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of cognitive change could not be isolated nor studied separately from the greater context of the women’s reality of having breast cancer. Cognitive change can effect employment and professional responsibilities and impact financial and social well being of women who are breast cancer survivors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Future research should include:
- Longitudinal studies beyond 1year post-treatment
 - Tailored interventions
 - Standard follow-up assessment



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