



## Suffering, Self-Acceptance and Finding the Meaning of Life in Women with Breast Cancer After Mastectomy

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### ABSTRACT

Breast cancer is a malignant disease that most often occurs in women and provides a major change in their lives. Suffering, self-acceptance and finding the meaning of life are the main searches and objectives of this research. The aim is to describe the process of deep meaning in life that is felt by women with breast cancer after mastectomy. This study uses a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. Researchers get data by means of purposive sampling technique, interviews, and the willingness of the subject to be interviewed. The sample is 6 women with breast cancer. The findings in this study indicate that in the process of finding the meaning of life, the subject goes through several phases of life. The first phase is the suffering phase, the second phase is the self-acceptance phase. the third phase is the phase of finding the meaning of life, and the fourth phase is the phase of meaningful life. Women realize the importance of maintaining a healthy body and make big changes in their lives. Women take curative actions to reduce their suffering, then accept the reality and analyze how much wisdom they get after mastectomy. Breast cancer survivors realize their lives are more meaningful, think positively, accept their shortcomings, are more religious and are optimistic about their future.

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## **BACKGROUND**

Breast cancer is a malignant disease and is one of the leading causes of death in the world (Tchente et al., 2022). According to a 2018 survey conducted by GLOBOCAN, there were approximately 2.1 million (11.6%) new cases of breast cancer and 626,679 (6.6%) deaths worldwide (Bray et al., 2018). Treatment for breast cancer includes chemotherapy, targeted therapy, hormone therapy, radiation therapy, and conservative or radical mastectomy. A mastectomy is a procedure performed under general anesthesia to remove the area of the breast that contains the tumor, often including the areola and nipple. In a sense, mastectomy is a surgical treatment for breast cancer (Olasehinde et al., 2019). Hearing this, women delay surgery because of psychological problems.

As mentioned in the research Pratama et al., (2021) delay or delay in treatment with mastectomy occurs because women experience fear and anxiety about having their breasts removed. In addition, black race, insurance ownership, low socio-economic level, low education level, lower cancer staging, larger tumor size, indications for mastectomy surgery, use of traditional medicine and the presence of comorbid anxiety and depression are considerations for women.

Some women refuse the treatment because they think their life has no meaning anymore for their partner. Another fear is that their partner is not satisfied with their sexual relationship (Dai et al., 2020). Women also thought there were changes for the worse when they had undergone the treatment.

Women's anxiety has been found in research Skórzewska et al., (2021) that women feel there is a negative impact after mastectomy. Breast cancer patients experience depression which causes a psychological crisis and most of them have

no hope for the future (Giese-Davis et al., 2011). The side effects of medical treatment in cancer patients increase emotional disturbances, significantly reduce quality of life, and cause general psychological disorders (Saeedi et al., 2019). Another study found that women with breast cancer felt psychological pressure in the form of the threat of death.

Women perceive that their lives are helpless with breast cancer, so they experience a decrease in the meaning of positive life and a lower quality of life (Obročníková et al., 2017). Several studies have shown that women with breast cancer experience decreased sexual well-being or sexual dysfunction after breast surgery (Aygin & Cengiz, 2018; Gass et al., 2017). The decrease in the quality of sexual satisfaction was not only found in previous studies, but also with the results of the study Ng et al., (2019). This indicates that women experience suffering and do not interpret their lives positively.

Initially there were no problems, but after the cancer was detected, the individual felt suffering. Breast cancer experienced by women has a deep psychological impact such as denial, sadness and so on. Individuals feel this is a tough test, but life goes on and there is meaning to every event including breast cancer. Suffering is so great as experienced by people with breast cancer can cause the loss of a meaning in life (Hannum & Rubinstein, 2016; Vehling & Philipp, 2018). There are changes that women feel after surgery such as choking in the chest area, postoperative contractures in the axilla, scapula muscle weakness, and limited movement (Birelliwat et al., 2021).

According to a recent systematic review, most patients who have had their breasts reconstructed find it meaningful. The meaning conveyed is that the quality of life is satisfactory, although there are slight problems such as decreased sexual sensation and sexual pleasure is not like it

used to be (Aygin & Cengiz, 2018; van de Griff et al., 2016). On the other hand, from the results of the research Bertrand et al., (2017) that mastectomy provides benefits such as increasing body satisfaction, developing self-esteem, higher quality of life and being able to interact more easily with the community.

The post-mastectomy relationship with the meaningfulness of individual life is very important. When the individual interprets his life more valuable than it shows a lifestyle that is full of enthusiasm and passion for life and is far from feeling empty in living daily life, has a more focused goal, daily tasks and work become a source of satisfaction and pleasure. This is indicated by an obedient attitude to therapy, taking medication regularly, maintaining a diet, and starting to exercise regularly.

Fear, sadness, and other negative emotions affect an individual's judgment in his life. From every event there is an implied meaning, if it is not anticipated then the individual feels the disease is a burden, depression and even suicide, so treatment is needed to realize his life for the better by accepting and discovering the meaning of life.

Breast cancer makes most sufferers feel depression and fear of death. The longer the patient will feel depression, the more severe the pain. For this reason, efforts are needed that can help sufferers much better by finding the positive meaning of their illness. Based on the description above, the researchers took real action, namely researching with phenomenological analysis and studies about the process of deep meaning in life felt by women with breast cancer after mastectomy. Meanwhile, knowing how the process of meaning in life and the methods used to find the meaning of life in women suffering from breast cancer after mastectomy are the objectives of this study.

## **METHOD RESEARCH**

### **Research design**

This research is designed in a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. The researcher found the research subject and then the researcher started to build a building rapport for each respondent. Then the researcher explained the purpose of the research to be carried out, made informed consent as evidence of the subject's willingness statement. Then, conduct an in-depth interview. After the data was obtained, the researcher transferred the interview data in verbatim form. Researchers use theme analysis because it makes it easier for researchers to give meaning to each meaning unit, meaning unit is obtained when conducting interviews with respondents who are competent in the research that the researcher is doing.

### **Research Participants**

The sampling technique used is purposive sampling. Thus, this study targets six subjects who are divided into Central Java Province and DIY Province, while two research subjects are domiciled in Kendal Regency, Central Java, one research subject is domiciled in Temanggung, Central Java, one research subject is domiciled in Tegal, and two research subjects are domiciled in DIY Province. For this research, it is more precise to use a qualitative study. Theme analysis is a technique for summarizing responses. From several themes found the dominant theme related to the phase of the meaning of life.

### **Method of collecting data**

In-depth interviews and building rapport with participants are the data collection methods of this research. Questions involving important matters containing the main points of discussion were asked, namely (a) What was experienced by the subject when he was first diagnosed with breast cancer? (b) How

does the subject interpret life as a breast cancer patient? (c) How is the subject's process of living as a breast cancer patient? (d) What are the factors that make the subject survive and be able to go through life even as a breast cancer patient? and (e) what positive impacts or lessons have been learned by the subject

### **Data analysis**

The data of this study are verbatim or the results of participant interviews for some time. The researcher clarified the subject's answers carefully from question as to question e. Researchers continue to explore as much information as possible to find phenomena ranging from the profile and journey of life as a breast cancer patient, the factors of meaning in life, and methods of finding the meaning of life. Before determining the results of the interview, the researcher made a category for each subject. Subject 1 is LN, W1, W2, L. Subject 2 is A, W1, W2, L. Subject 3 is K, W1, W2, L. Subject 4 is IL, W1, W2. Subject 5 is IT, W1, W2, L. Subject 6 is NR, W1, W2 and L. The researcher takes the main themes in each conversation. The researcher analyzed the data based on the categorization of themes and sub-categories of themes found in the participants verbatim.

### **RESEARCH RESULT**

The results of this study started from the number of samples. The sample in this study amounted to 6 people. Subject 1 named LN 55 years old. LN has studied S1 and is a widow. Then, subject 2 named AK who is 51 years old with a high school education. She is a widow. Next, subject 3 has the initials K and is 38 years old. His last education is S1 and is married. Furthermore, subject 4 with the initials IL is 47 years old. IL's last education was S1 and was married. Furthermore, subject 5 has the initials IT

with the age of 43 years. The last IT education is high school and widow status. After the identity of the subject, the next result is a phenomenon that occurs in women with cancer. Women feel pain at the beginning of this diagnosis. Well, this refers to the first question, namely what was felt when you were first diagnosed with cancer. Then the subject interprets his life by accepting himself. Furthermore, when they have accepted themselves, the individual lives his days better which will be discussed in sub-C. Next, then finds the meaning of his life and a meaningful life for women. Let us discuss these phenomena one by one.

### **Profile and Life Journey as a Breast Cancer Patient**

#### **Response First Time Diagnosed**

The response when they were first diagnosed with breast cancer, the six respondents experienced widespread stress. The suffering phase describes the existence of individuals who are in a state of meaningless life, caused by tragic events or unpleasant conditions. In this phase the meaninglessness of the subject's life is marked by feelings of hopelessness, sadness, anxiety, and is also covered by a sense of rejection of disease, even the fear of death.

*"The first time I was obviously shocked, it was a very sad shock, how come I got breast cancer because I didn't feel any pain at all, and the lump just appeared right away"*

Another response is rejection of the disease. Individuals deny and do not accept the disease as said by subject 2

*"The feeling is right, it's crazy, right, deck, sometimes you ask why all this happened to me and my sister, so suddenly it was tight at that time, I just wanted to cry, and I wanted to pray and ask that this was just a dream".*

The next response is despair. Despair makes a woman lose hope and lack positive

emotions in her. The picture of the ex-cancer woman's despair below on subject 1

*"Wow, I'm already messed up, there's no hope for life to give up, that's how it feels, there's a lot of fear what will happen next."*

### **Accepting yourself**

This phase describes the condition of the subject's awareness to get better. In the results of this study, the self-acceptance phase went through a process of contemplation, positive thinking, prayer, and learning from the experiences of others about dramatic events during life, until finally the subject was able to accept himself again which was indicated by personal changes for the better.

Most of the subjects with breast cancer through reflection, self-introspection until finally diagnosing breast cancer. An overview of reflection on subject 4 includes:

*"Yes, basically, it's been a year to two years, madam, it took me a long time to start accepting myself, which is no longer perfect, hehe, so I used to tell the ustadzah, madam, to ask for spiritual cleansing, I changed a lot, madam, I'm back to being sincere. improve oneself."*

The next response is positive thinking. Positive thinking becomes the subject's way to accept his condition. Thoughts that are dominated by positive thoughts about the trials they experience. Subject 1 answers as follows

*"I've also changed my way of thinking a lot and have never stopped asking for God's direction. Finally, I can accept myself again until now, because with positive thinking I feel a little calmer, not suddenly feeling calmer if everything is controlled."*

### **The Factors of the Meaning of Life**

The results of the meaning of life as a person with breast cancer are different from each other, here are the results of the

description of the meaning of life obtained by each subject with breast cancer:

Subject 1 said that "I feel that since I was sick and getting to know the breast cancer community, what I feel is that I have greater gratitude to God that God is actually very good, I am even more grateful. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the factors that influence individuals to interpret their lives are religiosity, gratitude, self-awareness, and self-love

Subject 2 said that "suffering makes me enthusiastic and optimistic in living life in the future so that I will be stronger because I am used to being sick, so I am mentally strong. From this testimony, it can be concluded that the factors that influence individuals to interpret their lives are spirituality, enthusiasm, self-awareness, self-love, and optimism.

Subject 3 explained that "the wisdom is very much, so I love the people around me, especially my husband, my husband used to be indifferent. This indicates that the factors that influence individuals to interpret their lives are religiosity, positive changes from husbands, and optimism.

Subject 4 formulated that the factors that influence the individual's meaning of his life are religiosity, positive changes from his husband, a sense of gratitude which is evidenced by the assumption "if I interpret this struggle as a form of warning where we should live, we also need to look down to realize that the wheel is still spinning. there are so many people whose fate is not as lucky as ours, so with that we can be more grateful and grateful for whatever we have, including our bodies, all of which we need to take care of and be grateful for."

Subject 5 voiced the factors that influence individuals to interpret their lives, namely religiosity, patience, gratitude which was explained "I let it go, I always think positively to God, I leave everything to God because this is all entrusted to me by my husband. take lessons from every deposit.



Factors influencing subject 6 to interpret his life as religiosity, strong, patient, and independent personality which is supported by a statement that is "yes the lesson is so that we can become better and more diligent in our worship to maintain health".

### **Method of Finding the Meaning of Life**

This phase covers the important methods that the subject does. The process of finding meaning is influenced by two methods, namely the method of finding the meaning of life internally and the method of finding the meaning of life externally. Internal methods include self-understanding, external positive actions such as intimacy and worship.

Self-understanding helps women to identify objectively their strengths and weaknesses. This is useful for developing positive potentials and reducing negative aspects from an individual perspective as described by subject 6, namely:

*"I see myself as normal, ma'am, just like women usually I don't feel there is anything different about me. Weakness is in my guts and in my mind, ma'am, especially at the beginning of the diagnosis, I dropped it, so that made me a little stressed. Maybe it's my patience in asking ma'am that I'm proud of, maybe yes, so I never get tired of asking for strength healing."*

The next meaning is to act positively where individuals get used to making changes such as changing behavior patterns from negative to positive in line with the statement of subject 4, namely

*"Yes, at least, Ms. teaches, I meet friends, I meet students, so it's just fun, I'll meet my neighbours at home, there's a social gathering, that's how it was when I was alone a little, I didn't think much of this disease, so I'm confused about things that makes me happy."*

Subject 5 also gave almost the same answer as "even though I am lying sick, yes,

ma'am, I have to listen to the murotal if I can get up, my body is better if I use it for the Koran, sis".

The meaning of life that is explored is familiarity with relationships by fostering intensive and close relationships with certain people such as family, friends, co-workers, neighbours and so on. This statement is supported by the answer of subject 1:

*"So that's it, when we come home from the gathering, we feel happy, excited, happy, basically we feel that we are not alone, feel embraced, let's go through this test together, there are many positive things that we do, there are also encouraging friends tomorrow who wants chemotherapy because the effects of chemo are very severe, we have experienced the same thing, so we give our support."*

Worship becomes more meaningful. This is also found by most of the subjects where worship can calm feelings, be steadfast, get directions and be strong to face breast cancer. One of the subjects answered that:

*"Peace of heart and mind by complaining to Allah more often. It makes our minds calm and more comfortable. And so that I don't listen to negative things from people. Because I have people who are closer to me, namely family and Allah, who oversees everything. I'm always positive thinking".*

### **DISCUSSION**

Suffering from cancer is the most common crucial problem found. Included in the findings of this study is that individuals feel very heavy suffering when they know the doctor's initial diagnosis. The description of the condition of women with breast cancer is in line with the results of research which reveals that cancer is known to have a

negative effect on all aspects of human life which includes physical aspects, psychological aspects, and social aspects (Tirgari et al., 2012). The impact of the cancer verdict is also a factor in the emergence of the subject's perception of death. This study succeeded in identifying how feelings arise regarding perceptions of death in women with breast cancer.

The feeling of fear of death is a negative perception that arises from the six research subjects. Many things are a factor in the subject's fear of death, one of which is the fear of separation from the family. Anxiety or fear of death raises several thoughts, one of which is separation from loved ones, in this case husband and children.

Excessive anxiety or fear was not found in this study. Precisely after feeling cancer for some time, the process of self-acceptance appears. This is marked by an understanding of himself, including an understanding of his weaknesses and strengths, being able to accept whatever happens in his life and changing attitudes towards his condition as a breast cancer patient. This statement has been predicted to be significant according to the results of the study Chen et al., (2020) that the self-acceptance of Chinese women with breast cancer is characterized by changes in identity and body image. Individuals love themselves more and become better.

When self-acceptance gets stronger, it becomes easier to take meaning from each event. Breast cancer is also an unwanted event before but has already happened so of course the next action is to do self-understanding, act positively, make relationship intimacy, and worship. The results of doing intimate relationships make women with breast cancer get full social support because of doing close social relationships.

A slightly different finding was expressed by Alimujiang et al., (2015) in his research explained that the existence of

great support from a partner can have a positive effect on optimism for healing. The length of marriage also affects breast cancer patients in interpreting the meaning of marriage. These findings are in line with the results of this study that, three of the six research subjects who were married revealed that, at the beginning of their life as breast cancer patients who underwent a mastectomy, judging from the sexual aspect they were not confident in front of their husbands because their body condition was no longer perfect, but as time goes by, it is the support from their husbands that becomes their strength to regain their confidence in front of their husbands.

Research results from Anggraeni and Ekowati (2010) also shows that the attention of a husband or wife is an internal support group that is very helpful in recovering health for the partner being treated. The importance of support from friends and fellow breast cancer patients was expressed by four of the six female breast cancer subjects who joined the community and established good relationships with fellow breast cancer patients. Very close family relationships, high empathy and empathy, and deep emotional closeness make each other more grateful and enthusiastic in living life even though they are sick.

The results of this study are in line with the research conducted by Kroenke et.al. (2013), regarding the importance of social support for people with breast cancer, the study revealed that in addition to family support, there is a relationship between social networks and social support mechanisms on the quality of life of cancer sufferers after being diagnosed with breast cancer, namely social support that comes from friends, neighbors, and family members. community. In addition to familiarizing themselves with humans, individuals also familiarize themselves with God through worship.

In this study, all female subjects with breast cancer felt the positive impact of

worship. Research conducted by Zamanian et al., (2015) also revealed that the problems that often arise in patients with chronic diseases including cancer are psychological problems. All subjects try to get closer to God to get peace of mind. One form of self-approach to the creator is by carrying out religious practices or worship, namely (praying, dhikr, reading the Qur'an, or providing church services).

There is hope in life after getting closer to God. Life expectancy is aligned with social support, gratitude with psychological well-being so that the meaning of their life is more meaningful and valuable (Rifayanti et al., 2021). These variables have a significant effect on women's beliefs and better quality of life.

The implication of this research is to reduce the feeling of inferiority in women with cancer so that they can function and benefit society. Women can also actualize themselves with Positive I divided into two parts, namely "Self-Knowledge" and "Self-Expression". In the Knowing Yourself section, individuals who study note what they perceive to be their individual strengths and weaknesses. Then, in self-expression, individuals are invited to demonstrate and work on the challenges that are on the paper or cards given to them. This game is one of the effective ways to reduce feelings of inferiority (Permatasari et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Individuals can find the meaning of the disease they have suffered. Individuals are aware of the suffering and recovery that is quite long because of the family's social support and miracles from God. There are several methods used in finding the meaning of life, namely self-understanding, positive action, relationship intimacy, and worship. The phase which is in the phase of finding the meaning of life describes the subject's

life which is meaningful again after going through several phases of the previous life.

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