Meaning of breast cancer for women facing diagnosis

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: In the West, female breasts symbolize femininity and sexuality. Thus, breast cancer becomes stigmatizing for women. **OBJECTIVE:** Know the meaning of breast cancer for women who have experienced the disease. **METHODS:** A qualitative study using Symbolic Interactionism and Data Based Theory. The collection took place in January 2014, with 13 women attended in a Brazilian hospital, through semi-structured interviews, recorded, guided by the guiding question: "what is the meaning of being diagnosed with breast cancer?". **RESULTS:** Meanings: 1) fear of death, feeling of sadness by loss of breast and concern with alopecia. 2) sequelae of treatment, such as difficulty in performing tasks, altered family structure and autonomy deficit; hair loss referred to the image of "naked body," "disfigured face," but also meant a passing and necessary event for healing. 3) concern to make use of hormonal therapy, examinations and medical consultation to follow the pathology and, with their daughters, due to the heredity of the disease; 4) Previous, negative, cancer-related experiences, such as the death of a loved one, have meant more severe coping with the current disease; positive experiences, such as experiencing the recovery of a person with cancer led to better coping with the disease. **CONCLUSION:** Having breast cancer had a frightening significance, and caused important changes in the daily lives of these women, but having experienced previous (positive) experience with cancer meant better coping with the disease. Previous negative experiences have made this process. **Key-words: Breast neoplasms. Nursing. Women.**

METHODS

It is a study developed in a Brazilian hospital. Theory Based on Data (TBD) was the methodological approach and, the Symbolic Interactionism (SI), was the theoretical approach used. Data collection took place between January 08 and 29, 2014. Inclusion criteria: to be a woman, to have had a diagnosis of breast cancer, to have undergone surgical treatment to remove the tumor and to undergo chemotherapy. Exclusion criteria: women who were in palliative care. Thirteen women were interviewed using the guiding question: "What is the meaning of being diagnosed with breast cancer?".

RESULTS

Category "Experiencing breast cancer" presenting four sub-categories, with the following meanings :

1) “Receiving the diagnosis”

The diagnosis of breast cancer brought a triple issue: the fear of dying, the feeling of sadness at the loss of the breast and the concern about hair loss.

“When the news comes, you scare! Here comes the surgery (...) it's very fast. Comes the news, then you're still going to take the breast, then the chemo is coming. So it does not give you much time to reason (...). After the first chemo comes, which drops the hair, it seems that you give a relaxed and speaks: ours (...) now let me breathe! Let me think about my life! Because, then, everything is new. Then there is nothing new, you know more or less what awaits you!” (E13)

2) “Adapting to treatment”

It revealed treatment sequelae, such as arm lymphedema; difficulty in performing tasks, alteration in family structure and autonomy deficit; hair / hair loss (chemo) referred to the image of "naked body", "disfigured face", but also meant a passing and necessary event for the cure.

“You say you have cancer, the first thing they look at is if you have chest! And look at the hair to see if it fell! It's the most interesting thing!” (E3)

“Her (disease) boundary! Look at that arm (...) I can not do anything with it; which it swells. I can not let it hurt, I can not (...) so it's the limit of it that gives the limitation to you, the difficult is this ... you accept.” (E9)

3)” Concern about hormone therapy and heredity of the disease”

It brought concern to make use of hormonal therapy, examinations and medical consultation to follow the pathology and, with their daughters, due to the heredity of the disease.

“And she [daughter] has to prepare a lot because she may have too ... for being a daughter!” (E3)

“We see cases of people who have had to go elsewhere (...) do my part to be accompanying to have no other surprise.” (E6)

4) “Previous experiences with disease”

The women report that their coping with the disease was positive if they had previously had a good experience with the disease, as in the case of someone in the family or living with cancer, recovered and in good health. In cases where a woman had experiences that have led a loved one or friends to death, they see illness as extremely negative in their lives.

“I think a lot about my sister. Hers was five centimeters, very aggressive. It was more advanced (...). And from her, I think I encouraged her more ... I said it like this ... people, if hers was so big and aggressive, if she went through that and she's calm. My little one like that and I'm not going to take out either the breast or anything. So I said like this: it's not possible that I will not win!” (E3)

“The experience I had with my husband (with cancer) was not good because he died.” (E6)

CONCLUSION

Knowing the meaning of breast cancer for women who have experienced breast cancer has enabled us to better reflect, as health professionals, about the care of nurses about this experience, especially during chemotherapy. Having breast cancer had a frightening significance, and caused important changes in the daily lives of these women, but having experienced previous (positive) experience with cancer meant better coping with the disease. Previous negative experiences have made this process.

These results should favor those professionals who provide nursing care to women under these conditions, so that they attend to the sufferings of the disease and provide guidelines in order to soften them, in addition to refer them to support groups.

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