

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**SURVIVORS OF CANCER:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University,
Palmerston North, New Zealand*

Janet Miller

2005

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of survivors of cancer. Eight participants, who were all diagnosed with cancer and had undergone various treatments, were interviewed. These participants had all survived the prognosis and treatment for cancer and continue to live as survivors. Their stories of survival were transcribed and analysed using a phenomenological approach.

Initially, the research question was aimed at the type of personal qualities these survivors have; for example, a fighting spirit, positive attitude, or internal locus of control, and whether they attributed their survival to a change in life-style or behaviour through, for example, meditation, diet, prayer, or beliefs. However, during the interview and transcribing process it became clear that, while their stories of survival were exceptional, the participants themselves did not attribute their survival to anything outstanding. They did not necessarily have exceptional personal qualities and were not highly motivated at the time of their diagnoses to change their lifestyle or way of being. None of them had remarkable reasons that they could attribute their survival to. Some attributed their survival to luck. This is consistent with the research by Killoran, Schlitz and Lewis (2002) who found that long-term survivors framed their recoveries as "being largely unremarkable".

What was very apparent in all of the survivors stories was that, with survival comes a whole new and different way of being and it poses new psychological issues that have to be faced daily, for the rest of their lives. While each participant's story was one of amazing courage, strength, hope and positiveness, it was also found that surviving cancer can and does have a dark side. Fear of recurrence is always in the forefront of the survivor's mind. Depression and mal-adaptive coping strategies occur in some survivor's lives. Changes in body image, employment, abilities, stress on relationships and ongoing health problems can render a person incapable of coping.

Therefore, the research question changed from one of looking at the personalities and life styles of survivors, to that of "what is it like to live as a survivor of cancer?" As a phenomenological study, this shift in focus was significant and necessary.

The interviews were analysed and data was formulated into four main clusters; "*Why me?*": cause, effect & making meaning & sense out of it all; "*I just want life to be normal again*": the issue of normality, redefining oneself and the physical legacy of surviving treatment; "*I've been told that cancer will eventually get me*": remission or cure? Living with uncertainty, fear of recurrence and "*Keeping busy and my mind off of it helps*": coping styles, control and attitude.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this research with deep respect to all of those people whom I have cared for with cancer over the years.

Thank you to Massey University for the privilege to study and learn to this level.

I would like to thank Dr. Christine Stephens for her patience, encouragement and supervision during this project.

I am grateful to those people who shared their stories and experiences with me: Zelda, Joan, Jenny, Sally, Marie, Kath, Joyce and May. My life has become so much more enriched by the encounters I have had with you and I am challenged by your courage.

Sally, who has now passed away, gave me insight into survivorship that opened my eyes to a different perspective. One interview with her, lasting less than 2 hours, was incredibly memorable, and has changed my perspective forever.

Jenny has also recently passed away. Her story of survival is one of great courage and strength despite developing another primary cancer 12 years after surviving breast cancer.

Thank you to my parents, Clem and Sheila Schmidtke from South Australia, who have always believed in and encouraged me.

Kyle, thank you so much for your unfailing patience, love and support, and especially for your assistance with word processing, editing and computer technology.

Emily, Jessica and Blake thank you for being in my life and encouraging me to complete this project. You are beautiful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION	1
SURVIVING CANCER: A DEFINITION	1
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES OF SURVIVING CANCER	1
RESEARCH AIMS	5
CHAPTER TWO INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY	7
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	7
INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY	9
SUMMARY	12
CHAPTER THREE METHOD	13
RECRUITMENT	13
PARTICIPANTS	13
OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS	14
DATA COLLECTION AND INTERVIEWS	16
DATA ANALYSIS	16
PRIOR ASSUMPTIONS	17
OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS	18
CHAPTER FOUR "WHY ME?" CAUSE AND EFFECT: SEARCHING FOR MEANING AND MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL	20
THE IMPORTANCE OF FINDING MEANING IN THE LIVES OF SURVIVORS: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION	24
CHAPTER FIVE "I JUST WANT LIFE TO BE NORMAL AGAIN" ISSUES OF NORMALITY, REDEFINING ONESELF AND THE PHYSICAL LEGACY OF SURVIVORSHIP	28
PHYSICAL LEGACY OF SURVIVORSHIP	32
MAINTAINING NORMALITY AND THE RE DEFINING OF ONESELF AS A SURVIVOR: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION	33
CHAPTER SIX REMISSION OR CURE? LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR OF RECURRENCE	35

REMISSION OR CURE	35
UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE	36
FEAR OF RECURRENCE.....	37
LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR OF RECURRENCE: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION	39
CHAPTER SEVEN “KEEPING BUSY AND MY MIND OFF OF IT HELPS”: COPING STYLES, CONTROL AND ATTITUDES.	41
COPING STYLES.....	41
BELIEFS	45
OTHER BELIEFS IDENTIFIED.....	47
ALTERNATIVE REMEDIES	47
THE ISSUE OF CONTROL AND MOTIVATION.....	48
ATTITUDE	52
COPING STYLES, ISSUES OF CONTROL AND ATTITUDE: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION.	54
CHAPTER EIGHT DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	58
DISCUSSION	58
LIMITATIONS OF STUDY	59
CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS.....	62
REFERENCES.....	65
APPENDIX A	69
APPENDIX B	72
APPENDIX C	73
APPENDIX D.....	74