

# Growth Beyond Illness: A Qualitative Exploration of Positive Psychological Outcomes Among Indian Women with Breast Cancer

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## Abstract

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women worldwide. Previous research has focussed on how individuals experience positive changes after traumatic life events like breast cancer. The present study is done because of fewer qualitative researches done on Indian women surviving the disease. The study aimed to explore the positive growth a woman may experience after being exposed to cancer. A qualitative phenomenological approach was selected to explore the experiences of Indian women. Thematic analysis was used and the data were gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 eligible participants. Four prominent themes were extracted from the participant's statements that demonstrated the Indian women's experiences with breast cancer. These were changed perceptions towards life, helping others going through similar condition, coping and handling adversities, future with cancer and belief in oneself. It is an original study and would recommend health care professions to develop programs that could improve positive growth among breast cancer survivors and reduce their perceived distress

**Keywords:** Breast Cancer, Post Traumatic Growth, Thematic Analysis, Trauma, Qualitative Research

## 1. Introduction

People experience various stressors in life. They not only experience negative emotions but may also have a negative impact on one's future as well. Besides emotional, these events may have a strong impact on physical and psychological well-being producing an overall general discomfort to both mind and body. Trauma is an event witnessed that may cause a serious injury, threat or even death of an individual. He/she may respond to an event with increased helplessness and fear [1]. A wide variety of events may be traumatic in nature such as accidents, physical or sexual assault, chronic illnesses etc [2]. A common characteristic of these events is that its negative side may lead to various psychopathologies but its positive side may lead to positive growth that may transform one's life.

Previous research has stated that breast cancer is common and is a major cause of death in women worldwide. However, due to its early detection and treatment, its prognosis states that women with this disease remain alive for around five years after its diagnosis. But in a lot of cases, the disease may reach to an advanced stage when it is actually detected at the first place [3]. Women may experience difficulties such as physical pain, social aloofness, negative emotions and fear of recurrence as a result of diagnosis and the treatment of the disease [4].

Despite of the above adjustment difficulties, these women try to experience positivity in their lives. Previous researches suggested that these women may find out new possibilities which they had not found before. They may start appreciating what the world offers them each day; find greater satisfaction with self and others. Moreover, they may experience quality of supportive relationships and have enhanced spiritual beliefs after experiencing the disease [5].

The term 'Posttraumatic Growth' (PTG) was coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun in the year 1995. It referred to positive psychological changes an individual experiences after being exposed to traumatic events causing major suffering. PTG has a quality of transforming an individual to make himself/herself distance from the trauma in such a way that it may lead to an improved social, emotional and psychological functioning [6]. An important point to note is that PTG does not only refers to return to a baseline functioning after a traumatic experience has occurred but it also represents a transformative quality that even exceeds the baseline functioning. This positive growth would occur only after experiencing an event that is highly traumatic in nature and shatters basic value and belief systems of one's life. So, an individual should be exposed to an event that is unpleasant, discomfoting and highly negative in nature as daily life stressors and stress due to maturational processes are unrelated with positive growth. Also, positive change will only occur in an individual after he/she has struggled enough with the trauma [7].

There are many factors that relate to PTG among breast cancer women. Younger participants reported higher scores on the PTG compared to older participants because trauma experienced at a younger age shatters future assumptions and becomes more disruptive [8]. Also, women indicate more growth than men because they tend to socialize differently [9]. Factors like high income, better education and stable employment is also found to be linked with psychological growth [10]). Moreover, psychological concepts like self-esteem, optimism and being hopeful of the future is also related to posttraumatic growth [11].

An important component of positive growth is cognition. According to the researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) [12], when an individual experiences a trauma, he/she undergoes through cognitive restructuring process which may lead to positive growth in some individuals depending on if this cognitive restructuring or processing is stable enough. Besides cognition, time is also an important requirement for growth to happen as more the time elapsed since the traumatic event has occurred; more is the growth [13]. However, a host of researches in the past have stated time as an un-associated factor of PTG [14].

A similar construct to PTG is resilience. However, both of these constructs differ considerably. Resilience is referred to as return to previous baseline functioning but PTG refers to extending beyond it. So, for an individual to experience PTG, he/she must exhibit resilience which was supported by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1995. But the opposite may not be true i.e. it is not necessary that an individual who is resilient also experiences PTG. This is because, for PTG to occur, an event should be highly challenging. So, resilience indicates effective coping ability whereas PTG indicates a transformational ability of an individual.

Both positive and negative changes may occur together after occurrence of breast cancer. For example, 73% of the cancer patients reported positive and negative experiences together. Many women experience positive changes because of the disease like supportive relationships and changed priorities is life but these positive changes can occur with negative experiences simultaneously like fear that the disease may occur again. Researchers have also stated cancer to not only be a disease but a transitional event in one's life which gives individuals an opportunity to engage in self- reflection and to gain a new interpretation of their life [15].

It can now be stated in a nutshell that on a positive side, experiencing the disease can lead the women being more compassionate, accepting of ironies of life, have a mature and an enhanced self, being strong, patient and tolerant [16]. Above all, it is important to understand that having experience PTG will not leave all the distress behind. Continuing distress is important for cognitive restructuring and processing. This helps individuals to modify their perceptions towards life and others. So, distress continues to be a precursor of PTG.

The present study seeks to understand positive transformation females may experience as a result of breast cancer. It is important to understand the positive side of the trauma in the Indian context. Females were chosen to be a sample in the present study as they exhibit more traumatic stress and are likely to develop more growth than men [17].

## 2. Method

The study explored the positive transformations women experience after surviving breast cancer.

### Sample

The data was collected from 10 breast cancer survivors through purposive sampling method. The inclusion criteria included being an Indian women surviving breast cancer whose time since diagnosis was between 12-24 months. The data was collected during chemotherapy sessions. The study's exclusion criteria included any previous history of psychiatric illness in past 6 months and unwillingness to be participant of the study.

**Table 1 showing demographic details of women surviving breast cancer**

Participant	Age	Education level	Employment	Marital Status	Stage of Cancer
1	40	High School	Employed	Married	II
2	46	College Degree	Not Employed	Married	I
3	57	College Degree	Not Employed	Married	I
4	65	High School	Not Employed	Married	II
5	42	College Degree	Employed	Married	II
6	52	College Degree	Employed	Married	I
7	61	College Degree	Not Employed	Married	II
8	48	High School	Not Employed	Married	I
9	51	College Degree	Not Employed	Married	II
10	55	College Degree	Employed	Married	II

### Tool Used

**Interview Schedule:** It was used as the main tool for collection of data for the research. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions that helped to explore positive changes the females experienced as a result of their exposure to the traumatic experience. It was constructed with two main parts, first part comprising of Demographic Profile of participants that included personal details and family history. The second part comprised of questions pertaining to positive growth.

### Procedure

The objective of the present research was to explore the positive transformations women experience after surviving breast cancer. Data was collected from hospitals with the permission of the oncologist and purpose of the research was told to the participants. They were told that they can leave the study at any

time they want. Data was collected with the help of a semi-structured face to face interview schedule. Each interview took approximately 40 minutes and all interviews were recorded. The researcher asked questions about the following topics- changed perceptions towards life, helping others going through similar condition, future with cancer, belief in oneself, coping and handling adversities with cancer. Thematic analysis was used to explore the experiences of females diagnosed with breast cancer.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analysed with thematic analysis to gain insight about the participant’s transformation with the disease. This method involves discovering codes getting combined to general themes from the data. Data was analysed by transcribing the interview and then making codes on the basis of the context of these interviews. After this, the codes were revised and themes were drawn. Various themes were drawn from the data given by each individual. After the themes were generated, thematic maps were made which helped in discovering important connections in the study.

**3. Results**

A total number of 10 participants after meeting the inclusion criteria were included in the study.

**Table 2 showing themes and sub-themes from the participant’s transcriptions**

S.No	Theme	Sub-Theme	Extract
1	Changed Perceptions towards life	Mortality as a catalyst for growth	‘Death can take you with it anytime. So, till the time you are living, live your life fully with no regrets.’
		Spiritual Growth	‘My disease is God’s decision. I am no one to challenge it. He is the writer of my life.’
		Appreciate life and live in present	‘I try and ‘live’ every day and do as many things that make me feel better.’
2	Helping others going through similar condition	Feel Good	‘By helping others, I learned so much about myself which ultimately made me feel good’
		Ethical and moral duty	‘I feel strengthened to help people around. For me, it is of high priority to be able to change the word and feel good about it’
		Empowering experience	‘When I help others, I feel confident to be able to make even a small difference in lives of other.’
3	Future with Cancer	Adapting new and healthy lifestyle approaches	‘Before the illness, I never cared about taking a healthy diet or going for a physical exercise. Now, one thing is sure that I will adjust myself to healthy lifestyle and will ensure that I continue it for the remaining life.’
		Charity	‘I have not done any charity in my life. As I have been given the opportunity by

			God to live again, I see my future performing charity work and establish the foundation for a good life in the other world.’
4	Belief in oneself	Self-confident and resilient	‘God’s blessing and my will power in trying to overcome the disease has made me stronger than before’
		Discovered hidden personal strength	‘I would say that cancer made me more aware of myself, what I want and what my priorities are.’
		New plan for life	‘I have decided to pursue certain goals and tried to do things I haven’t done before.’
5	Coping and handling adversities	A strong individual	‘I just feel like the disease has made me stronger’
		self-reliance and determination	‘I am not bothered about the disease coming to me again as I believe that I can survive it every time it comes to me’
		Getting through anything in life	‘I can get through almost anything in my life now. I think this has made me mature enough to deal with other difficult situations in my life.’
		Supportive relationships	‘I realized that I won’t be able to deal with it alone. My friends and family supported me and as a result I am going through this cancer journey positively.’
		Closeness with God	‘I feel that God is a powerful, supportive and reliable source for me in dealing with my illness. I feel close to almighty and this helping me in coping with my illness.’

#### 4. Discussion

The present study explored positive transformations women may experience after surviving breast cancer. This study focused on an extent to which women can enhance positivity and reduce meaninglessness of their lives because of the trauma. Data was collected from hospitals with the permission of the oncologist. The participants were briefed about the research and the permission was taken from women who expressed their interest in participation. The researcher asked questions about the following topics- changed perceptions towards life, helping others going through similar condition, future with cancer, belief in oneself, coping and handling adversities with cancer. Thematic analysis was used to gain understanding of the data. The data was transcribed and following themes and sub themes were developed through the analysis of the data.

### **Changed Perceptions towards life**

The disease changed the participant's perceptions about life. Most of them regarded facing their mortality as an important determinant of their transformation. They faced the fact that death can take them away at any time. This helped them understand their priorities and to know what is important in life. A woman reported, "After diagnosis, I felt that my death is near. I did not have any hope for future and I had this feeling that life is coming to an end. Now that I am getting a treatment, I have realized that death is an important part of the life circle and one has to accept this fact. Moreover, I have realized the importance of many things in life." So, most participants spoke about their own perceptions about death. The diagnosis with the disease leads one to questions mortality and challenging own value system [18].

It also came out from the analysis that spirituality is an important characteristic and may lead a women move through her cancer journey smoothly. Many wish to live a more meaningful life by deepening their spiritual beliefs and turning to spiritual practices. They were of the opinion that God was in control of everything that was happening to them in their life. Studies have found relationships between spirituality and positive psychological growth stating that higher levels of growth is associated with higher levels spirituality [19, 20].

As mentioned above, participants reported that the cancer journey has made them accepted about the fact that life is uncertain, so it is important to be appreciative of life as a result. Appreciating small things that individuals have in life endorse a sense of discovering new possibilities [21]. They embrace life by thanking each and every day they get to live. This appreciation comes from both the vulnerability and a desire to live life more fully. One of the breast cancer participants who undergo sessions of chemotherapy had a changed perception about life after the cancer diagnosis. She reported that "I put aside unimportant stress. I don't bother about struggles in life anymore because I believe if I'm alive, all problems have a solution."

### **Helping others going through similar condition**

Most of the breast cancer survivors were of the opinion that they can help other trauma survivors. It makes them feel good to be able to help someone suffering from the same disease as theirs. One of the breast cancer patients said "By helping others, I learned so much about myself which ultimately made me feel good." Many women feel blessed about the support they have received from others, so they wish to help others cope through the disease.

Some of the patients stated that they would want to help others because it is their ethical or moral duty. A participant reported that "I feel responsible enough to make even a small difference in reducing the adversities of this world. I see a lot of negativities in this world and I want to help people around. This is my priority"

Breast cancer participants also reported that helping others is an empowering experience which made them confident about the fact that they are competent enough to be able to make even a small difference in lives of others. Not only helping others makes them feel good but it also helped the trauma survivors to deal with their healing or recovery process [22]. Also, females reported that helping others going through the same disease gives them a sense of purpose of life as it allows them to reframe their future. Helping other trauma survivors makes these women deal with their own recovery process, understand their strengths and resilient capabilities. This in turn helps them to continue helping others. It also is a way of engaging in their own healing process

### **Future with Cancer**

Many patients reported that being afflicted with breast cancer confronted them with the fact that the opp-

ortunity to live in this world and enjoy its beauties was limited. Most of them stated the unpredictability of life, so they want to adapt to new and healthy lifestyle approaches in order to enhance their lives. This change can be done by having a healthy diet, increasing physical activity and coping with stress. A patient reported that “I never used to care about my diet before the disease. But the illness has made me to adjust to a healthy lifestyle and some physical exercise.”

Also, some patients reported that they would like to help the humanity. Many participants reported to help others by performing charitable works. A number of patients stated that they want to help other patients by empathizing and supporting them and their families. They also reported that they think they have been able to survive only to help other people who are undergoing with the same disease. In sum, post-cancer makes a person see life anew. These women developed strength of mind, willpower and optimism through their engagement with the disease, which they didn't have before.

### **Belief in oneself**

Some women considered their experiences with breast cancer diagnosis and its treatments as an important factor to believe in them. They reported that after suffering the traumatic event, they became self-confident and resilient. Moreover, they had developed problem solving and positive thinking skills. One of the patients reported “God's blessing and my will power in trying to overcome the disease has made me stronger than before”. For some participants however, the disease was stressful both physically and psychologically.

After their cancer treatment some breast cancer patients reported that they had recognized the hidden personal strength and priorities in their life. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) [7], with surviving a trauma, an individual gets an understanding that he/she will be able to withstand future difficulties. They develop personal strength but at the same time accept their own vulnerabilities.

For cancer patients, trauma raised their hopes to achieve new objectives in life. A cancer patient reported “I have decided to pursue certain goals and tried to do things I haven't done before.” Many women reported a realization of being stronger than believed. This strength referred to decreasing fear, negative emotions, and meaninglessness of life. They reported it coming in two ways, either becoming stronger than before that or discovering strength one was unaware of.

### **Coping and handling adversities**

Many patients stated that the disease has made them stronger than before. For them, the disease led them to become self-reliant. They felt that they can cope with any future illness and can deal with any possibility of relapse in future. Other women stated that, “I am not bothered about the disease coming to me again as I believe that I can survive it every time it comes to me.”

Most participants also reported embracing resilience. Many participants reported that the disease has made them mature enough to deal with the issues of their life. However, some females reported that the disease made them less resilient and more susceptible to stressors of daily life. Differing opinions would depend on the stage of cancer and their subjective recovery process.

Almost all the breast cancer patients spoke about supportive relationships that they had in their lives as being a key contributor in coping positively with their trauma. The cancer experience had led them to embrace quality of supportive relationships. They experienced trust and deep relationships with them. A cancer patient reported that “I realized that I won't be able to deal with it alone. My friends and family supported me and as a result I am going through this cancer journey positively.” Previous research also suggested that quality of social networks play an important role in dealing with diseases that are traumatic in nature [23].

In addition to this, almost all married women reported that their spouse's support was of utmost importance to them in dealing with their chronic illness. A woman reported "the only support I had was of my husband who supported me emotionally, otherwise it would have been difficult for me to cope with the illness". Previous research has reported that marriage helps women to cope with the traumatic experiences of the disease [24].

Also, many women reported that they became closer to God after their diagnosis. Closeness to God was a special situation for disease adaptation. One patient reported that "I feel close to almighty and this helping me in coping with my illness." It was found that although breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and its follow up imposed severe physical and psychological suffering on women, spiritual meaning-making for suffering could alleviate this suffering. In this support, spirituality has been found to be helpful in increasing patient's ability to cope with serious and chronic illness [25].

## 5. Conclusion

Hence, it can be concluded that these women reported positive changes in their life after exposure to traumatic events which made them resilient, optimistic and confident in meeting the challenges of life. They embraced supportive relationships which provided a sense of self belief. These women understood the importance of life and wanted to take advantage of opportunities available to them and become independent in life. The present study explored important findings with respect to positive growth in females undergoing breast cancer and it is hoped that future research will motivate researchers to explore more in the positive experiences people experience as a result to any traumatic event.

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