

New study shows positive personal growth following breast cancer diagnosis

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Although being diagnosed with breast cancer is usually an extremely stressful experience for most women, a new study by researchers at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center has found that there also can be unexpected benefits.

"Many [women](#) who have [breast cancer](#) often experience distress but sometimes are surprised that they also may experience a variety of positive outcomes following diagnosis," said Suzanne Danhauer, Ph.D., associate professor of public health sciences at Wake Forest Baptist and lead author of the study.

The study, which is published in the current online edition of the journal *Psycho-Oncology*, examined change in post-traumatic growth (PTG) over two years in 653 women. PTG is defined as the positive psychological change experienced as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. Commonly reported aspects of PTG include enhanced interpersonal relationships, increased appreciation for life, a sense of increased personal strength, greater spirituality and changes in life priorities or goals.

Participants completed surveys within eight months of diagnosis and also six, 12 and 18 months after that. The survey results were assessed using the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), an instrument for assessing positive outcomes reported by persons who have experienced highly stressful or traumatic events.

According to the researchers, total PTGI scores increased over time mostly within the first few months following diagnosis. Greater PTGI scores were associated with education level, longer time since diagnosis, greater baseline level of illness intrusiveness and increases in social support, spirituality, use of active-adaptive coping strategies and mental health.

"Our findings suggest that there are women who see a variety of positive changes during and after breast cancer treatment," Danhauer said. "Our study showed just how common it is for women to talk about the good things that have happened in their lives because of this illness, and it doesn't seem to be related to how optimistic a person is or not."

The study also showed that an increased amount of [social support](#) was associated with more post-traumatic growth in these women.

"Increased resources clearly help patients process what they are dealing with and feel supported, rather than feeling like they can't talk about their illness," Danhauer said. "For doctors and other health care providers, being open to hearing about what their patients are experiencing, including distress and unexpected positive outcomes, can be very beneficial."

Provided by Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center

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