Daughters of Women with Breast Cancer: Threatened, Coping, or Unaffected
Nicole E. Taylor, Heidi J. Woodland, Jordan E. Meggison
Department of Psychology, Drake University, Des Moines, IA, USA, 50311

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to investigate the psychological reactions of daughters of women with breast cancer. Also, the way in which women cope with the threat of breast cancer, how families are impacted by this disease, and post-traumatic growth among daughters was examined.

Methods: 142 daughters of women with breast cancer completed an online survey measuring their levels of anxiety, reported closeness to their mothers, exposure to their mother's cancer and involvement in caregiving, intrusive thoughts, self-reported predicted likelihood of getting breast cancer, self-reported likelihood of undergoing genetic testing, and personal ways of coping. In addition, these daughters completed 4 open ended questions addressing their reactions to their mother's cancer and positive coping strategies they used to deal with their mother's diagnosis.

Results: Daughters contact with their mothers during the mother's diagnosis and treatment was positively correlated with high levels of intrusive thoughts. Also, daughter's perception of the threat of the disease was not correlated with intrusive thoughts or a greater likelihood of seeking genetic testing. Qualitative analysis revealed daughters employed a variety of positive coping strategies and had a wide range of reactions to their mother's diagnosis as well as their personal ways of coping with their mothers' treatment.

Conclusions: The authors reacted in many different ways based on the different relationships they had with their mothers. Other important variables that affected participants' ways of coping were levels of anxiety, closeness to their mothers, levels of personal control, attachment styles, and intrusive thoughts about their mothers. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dustin Beeler.

Background

Over 200,000 new cases of breast cancer this year and one in nine women will be diagnosed in their lives (American Cancer Society, 2019). Elevated levels of anxiety, fear, and worry are associated with breast cancer diagnosis (Kawata & Pedretti, 2005). The impact of breast cancer on families is often overlooked. Daughters also have psychological and emotional reactions. Close genetic relationships that can lead to increased fear and emotional connection with mother. Carrying responsibilities in some cases may add additional stress.

Existing studies on daughters

- Focus on medical aspects of prevention
- Short-term psychological concerns
- Limited studies have examined the interaction of multiple variables
- Daughters feel the stresses they face are insufficient or invalidated by others (Welsh & Hoffman, 1997)
- Daughters' distress has been shown to be related to mother's level of communication, support, and perceived ability to cope (Cohen & Pollack, 2005)
- Women's risk of breast cancer report experiences (Cohen & Pollack, 2005)
- Chronic negative emotions and cognitions
- Sensitivity to breast cancer
- How does the disease affect women's self-esteem and body image?
- Confusion surrounding family issues, surveillance, and ideal level of knowledge about their risk
- Concerns about their families and children (Appleton, Fry, Rees, Rush & Call, 2005)

Procedure

- Given the theoretical framework, this study was designed to investigate the psychological reactions of daughters of women with breast cancer. How they cope with medical threat, and how breast cancer impacts families
- Online survey
- Contacted via list-serves, snowy mail, links on breast cancer websites, and referrals from clinics
- Measures cross-validated by password
- Benefit: wide range of participants, ease of participation, writing
- Descriptive field study with self-report survey data

Participants

- 192 women, ages 18-75
- At least 6 different ethnicities
- 35% of the mothers had died
- 55% currently cancer-free
- Wide range of occupations, educational levels, and incomes
- Mother's cancer diagnosis from 2 months to 25 years previously

Qualitative Analysis

- Team of three coders with one author
- Three individuals and primary investigator independently determined categories, then came to consensus
- Three coders and three of the three questions
- Came to consensus or invited author to assist coding team

Results

How has your mother's breast cancer affected your life?

- Many participants reported positive consequences as a result of their mother's breast cancer: increased life experience, feeling closer to mothers, making changes in their priorities, getting involved in breast cancer research, outreach, or activism
- Some felt more distant from their mothers or felt a loss because of their death
- Finally, 19% reported that they were less involved with breast cancer treatment
- The quantitative data that was included in this study showed that daughters who were more involved in their mother's treatment had higher levels of intrusive thoughts, perhaps indicating that daughters feel more at risk for breast cancer when they are closely involved with their mother's diagnosis, treatment, and care
- In this question, 38 individuals indicated multiple ways they were affected; 27% of the sample
- Some participants indicated that they got more involved: "I volunteer for the American Cancer Society" and work at our local Relay for Life. I purchase things that help fund cancer research. I am also a lot closer to my mother."
- Others expressed changes in their health habits: "I don't eat meat and make healthy eating choices."
- "I have had an increase in breast cancer prevention later in life.
- Many expressed a profound sense of loss: "It makes me feel terribly jealous when my girlfriends go shopping."
- "The change in general health habits in our family/ friends has often been noticed and that makes them buy themselves with wedding preparations - it really tears me apart."
- Her death has impacted nearly every major decision I have made in my life and I imagine it will continue to do so for the rest of my life."

- Daughters experienced a wide range of emotions after their mothers were diagnosed:
- Most individuals expressed feeling sad, scared, sad, or similar to previous studies (e.g. Kawata & Pedretti, 2005)
- Though many participants indicated a positive way that their mother's breast cancer affected them at includes: "I witnessed her courage and strength."
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- Interactive thought (e.g. "I prayed a lot, and cried a lot.

- Some took a different route.
- "I have learned that in life control is something that you do not have, and I’ve come to accept that I can move on and deal with what every life throws at you.
- Being positive. Realizing that dying is a part of living and each day is special."
- Some supported outreach and activism programs: "I participate with my family in events such as the Relay for Life and 3-Day Breast Cancer Walk."
- A number of others chose to disregard the situation: "Honestly, the most helpful thing to me was essentially to ignore it."
- "I tried to keep myself really busy with work and school."
- Some chose to use a more eclectic approach: "I became informed by research, talked with family and friends who have had similar experiences and by getting as much information from my mother as well as going on one of her each of her treatments so I could know what was happening."

Conclusions

Most of the women in the study used adaptive coping mechanisms and expressed a positive consequence of their mother's breast cancer, even when not prompted to do so.
- Relationships with others seems to be a key factor to coping.
- About 5% of the sample reported feeling at-risk for their own breast cancer, a population which may need special attention.
- About 1% of the sample perceived their likelihood of getting breast cancer (responders ranged from 0-100%), with an average of 57%.
- The most common was breast cancer awareness, indicating that most daughters thought their risk had the same odds as flipping a coin.
- Two findings from the quantitative data warrant particular attention: Higher levels of contact with their mothers was related to daughters report more intrusive thoughts as well as higher levels of mastery regarding breast cancer. This suggests that more contact with a significant other with breast cancer may make the possibilities of one's own risk as well as managers of risk and the disease less salient. Second, the link between perceived verbal of taking risks for getting breast cancer and having certain thoughts about breast cancer was not clear as significant relationships between these variables were not found in this study.
- Variables for clinicians to play special attention to include (1) whether anxiety and intrusive thoughts, as existing or ongoing anxiety, may create more problems in coping with a mother's breast cancer; (2) closeness with mothers, both emotionally and proximally, as daughters will spend more time with their mothers were more affected; (3) daughter's interest in genetic testing, which should be taken seriously and all ramifications of that decision should be discussed with daughters; (4) comfort for self vs. comfort for mother as some daughters were overly focused on their mothers and neglected their own health while others were more independent.
- Previous studies have shown that daughters of women breast cancer are more likely to show signs of stress (Boivin & Bourque, 1995), as well as be traumatized by their mother’s experiences and avoid present health care practices (e.g. mammograms, breast self-exams) (Boyce & Carter, 2003). This study suggests that reactions to a mother's breast cancer vary in individual and excessive anxiety or avoidance should be monitored by her healthcare providers.

Selected References