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Cancer and exercise: A narrative analysis of the journey undertaken for female dragon boat competitors

Background: A cancer diagnosis, and the subsequent period, is a largely unexplored phenomenon regarding short and long term effects exercise has on mental well-being. With an increasing number of people surviving cancer, there is a need for research to focus on ways of enhancing quality of life during remission and the role that physical activity might represent. As there is little existing qualitative research on this area, this study provides a novel insight into the journey undertaken by female cancer survivors who have discovered dragon boat racing as a means for enhancing quality of life.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the journey that those diagnosed with breast cancer experience; from remission to racing

Methods: Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hertfordshire ethics committee and all participants gave written and verbal consent. Four females who have had breast cancer took part in a semi-structured interview with sport and exercise post treatment. An analysis of emergent/resulting narratives was conducted.

Results: The analysis yielded an eight stage journey, from pre diagnosis to the present time, which illustrated a number of challenges: 1) Pre diagnosis: normal life and active. 2) Cancer diagnosis: loss of self and shock. 3) Treatment: Breakdown and re-identify. 4) Recovery from treatment: attempt positive health behaviours and trying exercise despite treatment side effects, ; "If I felt good I did exercise, but I didn't do it in some combative form to fight cancer". 5) The acceptance of self for what has happened: Relearning and confidence in self again. 6) The fight to return to normality: 'bringing me back to myself'. 7) A sense of commonality: dragon boat racing, the unspoken. 8) New me with a new outlook: new social networks and new life perspectives; "...you are where you are now, make the most of where you are now, really enjoy today, don't worry about what's going to happen tomorrow, don't think too hard about what you are missing in the past, just enjoy today".

Conclusion: The study adds to existing knowledge by illustrating the experiences of cancer survivors seeking to enhance their quality of life via sport and ownership of a new and unique racing identity. As the number of cancer survivors continues to increase there seems to be a significant role for physical activity within health services, and in the sharing of such unique narratives to inspire others.

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