

External Stressors during Breast Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment: A Qualitative Study

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Background

External stressors such as financial strain or psychosocial issues can influence the trajectory of a patient's breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Objective: The objective of this study was to understand external stressors experienced by breast cancer survivors at the time of their diagnosis.

Methods

- The National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC) launched a quality improvement initiative—Patient Reported Observations on Medical Procedure Timeliness for Breast Patients (PROMPT)—to examine timeliness in breast cancer care at NAPBC sites across the U.S.
- 1-hour interviews were performed with 28 female breast cancer survivors treated for Stage 0-III breast cancer from 2019-2022
- 22 institutions across the U.S. were represented

Theme 1: Psychosocial stressors

“Devastating. I can't even, I can't even go any deeper into it. It was a very, very devastating time.”

Theme 2: Financial stressors

“But that's where the financial worry just comes in because, here we are, six weeks out and chemo starting and we're still dealing with unemployment insurance and whether or not I qualify.”

Theme 3: Work-related stressors

“I worked remotely . . . And it was more stressful to do that looking back. Now that I'm going through radiation, I should have just taken the time off.”

Theme 4: Stressors related to a concurrent psychiatric or medical condition

“I have hypothyroidism and fibromyalgia. So my energy level is already pretty low, and the radiation was just going to put me beneath my level.”

Conclusion

Breast cancer diagnosis is associated with unique external stressors that may be addressed through quality improvement initiatives with a focus on mental health and financial guidance.