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Exploring the Sense of Coherence (SOC) Across Treatment Stages in Breast Cancer Survivors: A Qualitative Study

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Background: Breast cancer is the most common malignancy among women worldwide, and the number of survivors continues to increase as five-year relative survival rates improve (93.6% in Korea). Beyond medical survival, contemporary cancer care emphasizes supporting patients in recognizing and mobilizing health-promoting resources throughout the entire treatment trajectory and into survivorship. Within this resource-oriented approach, Sense of Coherence (SOC) is conceptualized as a core concept of salutogenesis, referring to a key psychological resource that enables individuals to understand life challenges and stress experiences, perceive them as manageable, and construct meaning through those experiences. Although SOC is recognized as an important predictor of treatment-related behaviors and long-term quality of life, existing breast cancer research has largely relied on cross-sectional designs using global SOC scores, thereby limiting qualitative understanding of stage-specific changes in SOC components and patients' lived experiences.

Purpose: Guided by Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model, this study aims to explore how women newly diagnosed with breast cancer experience changes in the three components of the SOC—comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness—across key treatment stages.

Methods: This qualitative longitudinal study will involve four repeat interviews with the same participants at distinct treatment stages: within one week of diagnosis, immediately before surgery, within four weeks after surgery, and three months post-surgery. Grounded in descriptive phenomenology, in-depth interviews will explore participants' lived experiences. Data will be analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, supplemented by matrix-based longitudinal comparison. Within- and cross-case analyses will trace temporal shifts in meaning and SOC. Analytical rigor will be ensured through an audit trail and reflexive memoing.

Expected Implications: This qualitative longitudinal study delineates stage-specific changes in SOC across early breast cancer treatment and survivorship, thereby deepening understanding of patients' meaning-making processes over time. The findings may inform the design of tailored supportive care, rehabilitation, and exercise-based survivorship interventions aligned with stage-specific psychosocial resources.

Keywords

Breast cancer, Sense of Coherence, Salutogenesis, Qualitative longitudinal study

Conflict of Interest & Ethical Approval

yes

Abstract submitters declaration

yes

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