Chapter 5
Informal Transformative Learning from a Life-Threatening Illness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how a life-threatening illness, specifically breast cancer, is an important site of informal learning. Research literature on the psychosocial transition of breast cancer, posttraumatic growth, and transformative learning theory are connected. Based on research, a model for informal transformative learning is presented. Broadly, this model has three elements: Crisis, Coping, and Engagement. The model addresses ways that a life-threatening illness can cause acute challenges, and that transformative learning occurs when a particular type of challenge is particularly problematic based on the person’s habitual ways of thinking and being. The model positions this type of learning as an adaptive response to changes in a person’s physical or social context changes, as well as when her positionality is altered within existing social contexts.

INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that the most important theoretical work begins with real world problems. In the case of this chapter, its genesis was in the experiences of seeing my mother and sister work through the diagnosis, treatments, and long-term effects of breast cancer. Thankfully they both survived, but I was able to witness from a firsthand perspective the psychosocial impact of cancer survivorship. Surprisingly, I noticed that this impact included both negative and positive effects. Because of this observation, I performed a generative, qualitative research study in order to better understand certain types of experiences that are possible during a life-threatening illness (Hoggan, 2011, 2014). That study led me to important insights. Foremost, the process of learning and change that occurs during a life-threatening illness is almost exclusively informal. The issues prompting learning are visceral and frightening; they are not some academic curiosity. Certainly, the learning does not occur in a classroom. It happens while driving down the street, looking in the mirror, or...
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lying in bed as you ponder your children’s future. Further, the types of learning outcomes that often evolve from a life-threatening illness are far different than the traditional categories of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the process of learning and change that occurs during a life-threatening illness such as breast cancer as an informal learning process. Because there has been little written on the experiences of survivors of life-threatening illnesses from the perspective of informal learning, this chapter draws on the literature from several different fields to provide a theoretical framework: the behavioral health literature to present the types of challenges typically faced during breast cancer, as well as literature from the field of psychology on “posttraumatic growth” to better understand the outcomes of personal change that are possible from a traumatic event. The literature on transformative learning is used to frame these changes in terms of learning outcomes. The remainder of the chapter presents a model depicting the process of learning and change as derived from the author’s research and discuss implications for future research.

BACKGROUND

The physical effects of breast cancer vary greatly. In addition to the obvious effects of a mastectomy or lumpectomy, long-term effects can also include menopause, infertility, menstrual changes, lymphedema, pain, sleep problems, weight gain, and various other physical problems that limit physical and recreational activities (Baucom, Porter, Kirby, Gremore, & Keefe, 2006). Additionally, many psychosocial effects arise, often causing the greatest anguish for those with breast cancer (Gonzalez & Lengacher, 2007). Common psychosocial issues that arise include psychological discomfort, changes in life patterns, fears and concerns related to breast cancer, existential crises, and social challenges (Colyer, 1996; Lydon, 2008; Meyerowitz, 1980). Please see the Key Terms section at the end of this chapter for a description of these challenges.

Clearly, breast cancer is a stressful experience with many potential negative psychosocial side effects. The psychosocial challenges described above for breast cancer patients, however, do not necessarily translate into long-term negative effects for survivors. Indeed, most survivors exhibit very healthy long-term psychosocial adjustments (Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2001). Some survivors, however, traverse beyond a healthy adjustment. For these few, the negative effects during treatment trigger a period of deep personal questioning, which some have called an “existential crisis” (Krouse & Krouse, 1981), spiritual disequilibrium with severe psychosocial pain (Coward & Kahn, 2004), and a potential “psychosocial recovery” that can lead to positive outcomes (Cordova et al., 2001, p. 176). The next section explores the literature related to “posttraumatic growth,” a term used by many researchers to describe this phenomenon.

Posttraumatic Growth

The term “Posttraumatic Growth” (PTG) refers to positive outcomes brought about through stressful experiences (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Posttraumatic growth describes the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred. The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo. Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline – it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006, p. 4)