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While there's life : hope and the experience of cancer

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Abstract

Hope is the subjective probability of a good outcome for ourselves or someone close to us. During mortal extreme experience, observers and participants in the experience hope for life over death. In cancer, the illness/treatment experience is similar to the experience of dying, but with the redeeming element of hope for cure, for life over death. If cure is not obtained, hope for the participant moves to a "good death"™.

If the outcome is cure, however, the hope for life has been realised for both participant and observer. Hope, which is always for the future, may now diverge between participant and observer. Observers hope for a return to normality, and use a discourse of normality which emphasises such things as "getting over it"™, "moving on"™ and "getting back to normal"™.

Survivors may not find the realisation of hope for life to be as comfortable as might be expected. After the euphoria of being declared free of disease, about 30% of survivors

develop post-cancer distress with *death salience*. They recognise, whether they want to or not, that they have confronted their own annihilation, and that they will at some stage have to do so again. We all know that we will die, but there is a greater vividness and proximity in that knowledge for someone who has been through mortal extreme experience.

Death salience provokes a confrontation with meaning in a person's life. Thus survivors turn inward to their deep selves in order to establish an understanding of what their life projects might become. Observers, on the other hand, find death salience hard to live with, and may turn away from the distressed survivor.

The hopes and discourses of survivors and those close to them may have different structures and different objects. These differences may help to explain the frequency with which stress and disruption affect close relationships after cancer and other life-threatening experiences.



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Keywords

Hope; Mortality salience; Cancer; Survivors; Australia

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