

## TAKING IN STIGMA – PHYSICAL DISCLOSURE AND BREAST CANCER

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**INTRODUCTION:** The assault of the female body by breast cancer strikes at the basic sense of a woman's well-being. It also assaults the societal concept of feminine beauty and the breast as an organ of nurture and sexuality. Therefore breast cancer, and its visible reminder; the scar, is constructed as a silent reminder of a deadly disease, the danger within. This study examines women's accounts of their breast cancer experience specifically, the phenomenon of physical disclosure, as a way to make the abnormal become normal.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** The purpose of this study was to examine women's accounts of physical disclosure as part of their breast cancer experience and physical disclosure as a way to normalize stigma.

**METHOD:** The data for this study are 8 transcripts of patient interviews that came from the a larger data set of 150 transcripts from the Family Concerns Study, completed earlier at the University of North Carolina School of Nursing. The transcripts were examined for instances of disclosure specifically, physical disclosure. The decision to center the analysis on physical disclosure was made due to the inference in the clinical nursing, and lay literatures that looking at the mastectomy scar was therapeutic, and aided women in adjusting to their altered body image and the related stigma. Not stated but implied in the act of looking at the incision was also showing the incision to someone else. These reports of disclosure seemed to be very important to the women's stories and were selected for further review. The stories of physical disclosure were analyzed for their common themes using grounded theory and narrative analysis augmented with women's accounts of physical disclosure from art and literature.

### **FINDINGS:**

The women in this sample showed their scars to husbands, children and grandchildren, to friends and to one research nurse. They also talked about the way they saw the scar and the feelings they had about their body changes associated with their breast cancer. Three main themes emerged; the gaze – reactions to changes in the woman's appearance; stigma – expressions of feeling marked; and; making the abnormal normal- adjusting to the changes of breast cancer. The phenomenon of physical disclosure and these women's stories about it provided a way to see their adjustment to the physical and emotional changes required to incorporate the stigma of breast cancer into their everyday lives. The themes identified by the women in the study were examined in context with other accounts of physical disclosure by breast cancer patients found in the literature, which provided further insights into the feelings surrounding physical disclosure.

### **DISCUSSION:**

These findings indicate that women are seeking to re-enter their worlds after the devastating diagnosis of breast cancer. Part of the way they do this is through physical disclosure. They fulfill the same roles they always have as nurturer, supporter and lover after their diagnosis but use physical disclosure to incorporate this new aspect of themselves. Showing their scars, their stigmata, is a way they use to ask those around them to accept them in their changed state. This study adds to information about adjustment to breast cancer and extends understanding of the rehabilitation of women after breast cancer. The role of physical disclosure in the process of normalization for patients after surgery is vital for nurses to understand in assisting women to adjust to life after breast cancer.