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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/19113

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/19113>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EFFECT OF BREAST CANCER TREATMENT ON WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

Mrinal Gupta

Psycho-Oncology Research Critical Analysis Paper.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 25 May 2024

Final Accepted: 28 June 2024

Published: July 2024

Key words:-

Breast Cancer, Body Image, Breast Cancer Treatment, Psychological Distress, Sexuality, Self-esteem, Relationships

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the impacts of breast cancer on the mental well-being of women due to issues in their body image through critically reviewing 5 research articles exploring the role of breast cancer and its treatment on psychological distress and body image disturbances. The study aimed to look at the importance of understanding the experiences undergone by breast cancer survivors to ensure a better recovery process and ultimately impact the healthcare system in providing a well-structured intervention plan targeting the issues in body image caused by the treatment. To explore this, literature covering women from across different cultural backgrounds, who had all undergone cancer treatment were studied. An in-depth case analysis was conducted exploring the studies' objectives, research methodology, database details, and inclusion and exclusion criteria incorporated in the articles. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide implementations that could help make the healthcare system more inclusive through a detailed analysis of the limitations in the studies. The sample consisted of 5 research articles, looking at women dealing with body image issues post-cancer treatment. The importance of studying factors such as sexuality, self-esteem, physical discomfort and the role of relationships when looking at body image issues was brought to attention in the form of research findings in the articles. The findings of the research suggested that physical and emotional well-being are the most affected areas that influence the body image of women who have undergone breast cancer treatment, especially focusing on distress and disturbances. Furthermore, it suggests that the healthcare system is lacking in implementing the need for discussing body image issues while dealing with follow-up management plans for breast cancer survivors. Inter-personal and intra-personal relationships with partners and others were considered important factors in building a better body image post-treatment. Self-compassion's role in reducing the risk towards a negative body image was given primary focus.

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Introduction:-

Breast cancer is known to be the most common cancer among women worldwide and occurs when there is an uncontrollable growth of abnormal cells in the breast tissue, which can form a lump or mass. While the exact cause of breast cancer is still not fully understood, there are several risk factors that have been identified by researchers,

Corresponding Author:- Mrinal Gupta

Address:- Psycho-Oncology Research Critical Analysis Paper.

including age, family history of breast cancer, certain genetic mutations, early onset of menstruation or late menopause, exposure to radiation and hormone therapy among others. Symptoms of breast cancer include several body dysfunctions and changes such as lump or thickening in the breast or underarm area, changes in the shape and size of the breast, nipple discharge or inversion, as well as skin changes, such as redness, dimpling or puckering. All these symptoms cause various body image issues in breast cancer patients that cause feelings of loss, grief, and anxiety as well as have been known to affect a person's self-esteem, confidence, and sense of femininity or masculinity. Moreover, while treatment options might help in curing the disease, they lead to drastic changes to the patient's life way beyond what the symptoms may have caused including the further altering the appearances of the breast, in terms of shape, size, and texture. Some treatment options include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy, or a combination of these treatments.

Therefore, it is highly important to study the extent to which elements of breast cancer are affecting the psychological, social and emotional well-being of the patients.

Methodology:-

An in-depth case analysis of 5 articles were done found using google scholar with the key-terms as 'impacts of breast cancer on body image in women'. From a result of more than 24,00,000 articles, a total of 5 articles were selected based on the publication criteria, articles focusing on body image of women post breast cancer treatment, mainly looking at the issues and the factors influencing these issues. Articles with keywords like impact and effects were taken up to keep the focus on the role of the issues. The publication of these articles was taken from within the past 10 years duration, while trying to take up studies from a year gap between each. To understand these issues from more of a cultural point of view, 2 out of the 5 studies were taken up from the Indian context, 1 narrative literature review was taken up looking at 190 articles to understand a different cultural view from a broad perspective and 2 articles that did not specify their cultural background and rather looked at body image from a holistic point.

Bharthakur et al. (2017) examined the impact of breast cancer treatment on women's physical appearances, self-image, and intimate relationships in India. The research involved 50 survivors aged 18 or above, who were married, spoke English or Hindi, had a minimum high school education, and had received chemotherapy or radiation therapy at least 6 months prior. The study found that breast cancer treatment significantly impacted women's body image, particularly in terms of identity, motherhood, attractiveness, sexuality, and body image. Women felt they lost femininity and attractiveness due to physical changes, fear of rejection, and concerns about breastfeeding. Early diagnosis led to inability to conceive and a loss of attention. Sexuality was negatively affected, with pain during sexual intercourse and less interest in sex. The study concluded that breast cancer treatment can profoundly affect women's physical and emotional well-being. Healthcare professionals should provide support and counselling to help women cope with these challenges.

Guedes et al.'s (2018) study examined women's body image perceptions and dissatisfaction with their physical appearance after breast cancer treatment. The study involved 103 Natal residents, who had undergone at least 12 months of treatment and were under clinical monitoring. The results showed a 74.8% dissatisfaction with their body image, which was linked to multi-professional follow-ups and return to employment post-treatment. Employment significantly impacted self-perceptions post-treatment, and multi-professional follow-ups contributed to negative body image. The study suggests the need for improved healthcare strategies to meet the needs of this population.

Rezaei et al. (2016) examined the psycho-socioeconomic and other factors linked to cancer and its treatment, specifically the impact on body image after breast cancer. The research was conducted through a narrative literature review of 690 articles published between 1993 and 2016. The quality of these studies was assessed using a checklist adapted from Samadaee-Gelekholaee (2016). Out of the 690 articles, 190 were selected for full text appraisal, with 44 for data analysis. The study found that various factors influence the body image of women who have undergone breast cancer, which could predict their inter-personal and intra-personal relationships with partners and others in their lives. These factors could also contribute to their life's issues. However, it should be noted that this review of literature failed to identify the factors that were not taken into account and only limits itself to the mentioned factors within these articles. Also, while selecting of the articles, multiple articles focusing of other influencing factors were left out leaving room for further research.

Thakur et al. (2022) examined the impact of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment on women's physical and psychological well-being. Specifically, they explored the effects of painful and debilitating therapies and the emotional trauma associated with them. The study focused on treatment modalities that resulted in multiple changes and found that they caused distress and altered one's appearance. The study utilized a cross-sectional method to conduct a descriptive study at a tertiary care centre in North India. It included 165 females, aged 36-51, who had undergone modified radical mastectomy. Three main scales were used to measure body image satisfaction and psychological distress; MINI 6.0.0, DASS-21 and BIS-10. The findings of the study suggested that the rates of depression, anxiety and stress were 27.2, 31.5, and 24.5, respectively. Additionally, 92% of the patients experienced disturbances in their body image. It was observed that patients who completed the treatment within 12 months were more likely to experience these disturbances compared to those who took a longer time. Furthermore, the study found no association between age and psychological distress with body image dissatisfaction. Instead, it identified body modification as the main cause. Therefore, the study concluded that the follow-up management plan for breast cancer survivors should prioritize evaluating and treating psychological distress. Additionally, it should address any disturbances related to body image that are found in patients.

Therefore, the study concluded with the suggestion that follow-up management plan for breast cancer survivors should be given more focus and should include evaluation and treatment of psychological distress and addressing these disturbances found with the patient related to their body image.

Przedziecki et al., (2013) examined the impact of breast cancer treatment on bodily changes and the resulting long-term distress. The study explored self-compassion as a means of helping women adjust to these changes. The objective was to test the hypothesis that self-compassion mediates the relationship between body image and distress, while also considering other potential mediators. Participants were recruited from a nationwide breast cancer consumer network, and a total of 279 women who had completed active cancer treatment participated by completing an online survey. The survey included various assessments such as the body image scale, self-compassion scale, and the depression, anxiety, and stress scale. The study found a significant indirect association between body image disturbance and distress, mediated by low self-compassion, as indicated by tests using a bootstrapping approach with multiple mediators. The study concluded that survivors who experienced body image disturbances and lower self-compassion were more likely to experience increased psychological distress. This preliminary evidence suggests that self-compassion may have a protective effect for women at risk of body image disturbance.

Conclusion:-

To conclude, there is a huge scope for further research considering the limited number of research explored within this analysis. Limited studies explore factors that could be used to advance the intervention plans provided. Moreover, Individuality of body image issues cause the need for more in-depth research into individualistic factors effecting the survivors.

While the explored research did look at factors such as inter-personal and intra-personal relationships, and role of self-compassion, these are very limited themes and future research can focus on sub-themes as well as other areas that help survivors to develop a better body image. Furthermore, Other genders besides women can be looked at, for example men are also known to undergo body image related disturbances and distress post breast cancer treatment. Men explore these issues on multiple levels some of which are quite different from those of women.

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