

## Self- Disruption: Phenomenological Exploring of Sense of Self Experience in Cancer Survivors

1.Mojtaba Dehghan, 2.Jafar Hasani, 3.Alireza Moradi and 4. Shahram Mohammadkhani

1. PhD Student in Health Psychology, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. mojtaba66dehqan@gmail.com
2. Corresponding Author. Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. hasanimehr57@yahoo.com
3. Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. moradi90@yahoo.com
4. Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. sh.mohammadkhan i@gmail.com

### Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the experience of "sense of self" in cancer survivors. The present qualitative research used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 people with cancer. From the implementation of interpretive phenomenological analysis on the interview texts, the general concept of "self-disruption" was discovered, which includes seven conceptual clusters: temporal disruption, highlighted body, interference in agency, individual- self disruption, over differentiation, relational- self disruption, painful emotional experiences. It can be concluded that in the exposure of cancer, different dimensions of sense of self are damaged and disrupted, and its severity affects the patients' adaptation. These findings indicate that cancer survivors need to reconstruction their sense of self, and it should be considered by cancer-related service providers.

**Keywords:** Cancer, Self-Disruption, Sense of Self, Phenomenology

### Introduction

A healthy sense of self requires the coherence of the life story, which is vital for psychological well-being (McAdams, 2015). But because of its troublous symptoms and treatments, cancer can present serious challenges to the cohesion of sense of self. In fact, in the presence of chronic diseases - such as cancer, the system of personal beliefs - identity (Palmer-Wackerly, et al., 2018) and the roles and responsibilities of the individual (Pesantes, et al., 2019) undergoes transformation and needs to be reorganized. In addition, a person experiences mortality and death at the time of cancer diagnosis and experiences a range of antithetical and ambiguous thoughts and emotions. For this reason, in recent decades, the study of patients' sense of self/identity" and the invasion of chronic diseases to "self-integrity" has been considered (Tarbi, et al., 2019). Thus, the diagnosis of cancer seems to interfere with the normal course of life story and its sense of coherence. This issue has led to qualitative research in developed countries, especially in Western societies, but has not been considered in Iranian psychology. However, the cultural and socio-economic conditions of cultures and societies affect the experience of living in the presence of cancer. As a result, the necessity to understand the "cancer survivor's sense of self" in the context of Iranian society requires qualitative research, which can have practical implications in health psychology. Therefore, the present study, as pioneering and exploratory research, addressed the issue of how "sense of self" is experienced by cancer survivors in the context of Iranian society?

### Method

This qualitative research was conducted by interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA). The study population was cancer survivors referred to cancer treatment centers in Tehran (Iran). The sample

was selected by purposive sampling and based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria included: age range 18 to 50 years, being male/female, informed and satisfactory participation in research. Exclusion criteria also included: suffering from other chronic physical illnesses, substance use, and a history of the prison. Based on purposive sampling, 17 patients entered the study, and codes A to Q were assigned to them. The saturation criterion was used to determine the sample size and adequacy of sampling (Creswell, et al., 2019). The saturation criterion was established in interview No. 15 (interviewee O), and to ensure saturation, sampling was continued until 2 people later (ie interviewees P and Q).

First, the announcement of the invitation to participate in the research was published on Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp. The purpose of the research and ethical principles were explained to the volunteers. Those who met the inclusion/exclusion criteria were included in the study. Interviews were conducted online (in WhatsApp). The process of data collection and analysis was as follows: 1) conducting semi-structured interviews; 2) Implementing interviews in the text; 3) reading the text of the interviews in two stages, and preparing memos; 4) coding themes; 5) categorize themes, and determine their relationships; 6) Assigning concept labels to the main categories, And 7) Preparation of a summary table of the main themes and categories. Finally, the appropriateness of the extracted textual units, codes, and themes was assessed by two evaluators who were out of the study, and the necessary corrections were made. The validity and reliability of this qualitative study were evaluated by different strategies.

## Findings

In exploring how is "sense of self" in the face of cancer, a central category was discovered based on the coding of the content of the interviews and the classification of the categories extracted from it, which is the link-point between the main categories, and was called the concept of "*Self-disruption*". Self-disruption includes 7 main categories (and sub-categories) that express a kind of disruption in sense of self: 1) *Temporal Disruption* means that at the time of cancer diagnosis, the continuity of sense of self over time becomes fragmented and disrupted. 2) *Highlighted Body* means that due to unpleasant physical experiences and changes caused by cancer, the person's body becomes more and more in the center of his/her attention and monitoring, and it seems that a break and lacuna is created between self and experiencing the body. 3) *Interference in Agency* means that after diagnosis of cancer, the person's control over personal, family, and professional roles and his/her functions is challenged and damaged, and even dependent on others to do so. 4) *Individual Self-disruption* means that after receiving a diagnosis of cancer, people think that there have been changes in their character, abilities, values, and outlook, that make them feel they are different from the person they once were. 5) *Relational Self-disruption* indicates that when people are diagnosed with cancer, meaningful relationships, reciprocal bonds, and feelings of belonging to others are challenged and transformed, and they experience anxious concerns about important loved ones and their relationships with them. 6) *Over-Differentiation* means that when people get cancer, they are preoccupied with the question, [Why was " I " chosen and not others to get this disease?]; And a survivor person thinks that he/she are no longer a normal human being or similar to others. 7) *Painful Emotional Experiences* mean that when different dimensions of sense of self are disrupted

in patients with cancer, they experience a range of painful and unpleasant emotions. The main categories and themes related to the experience of the sense of self are shown in Figure 1, and the sample codes are shown in Table 1.

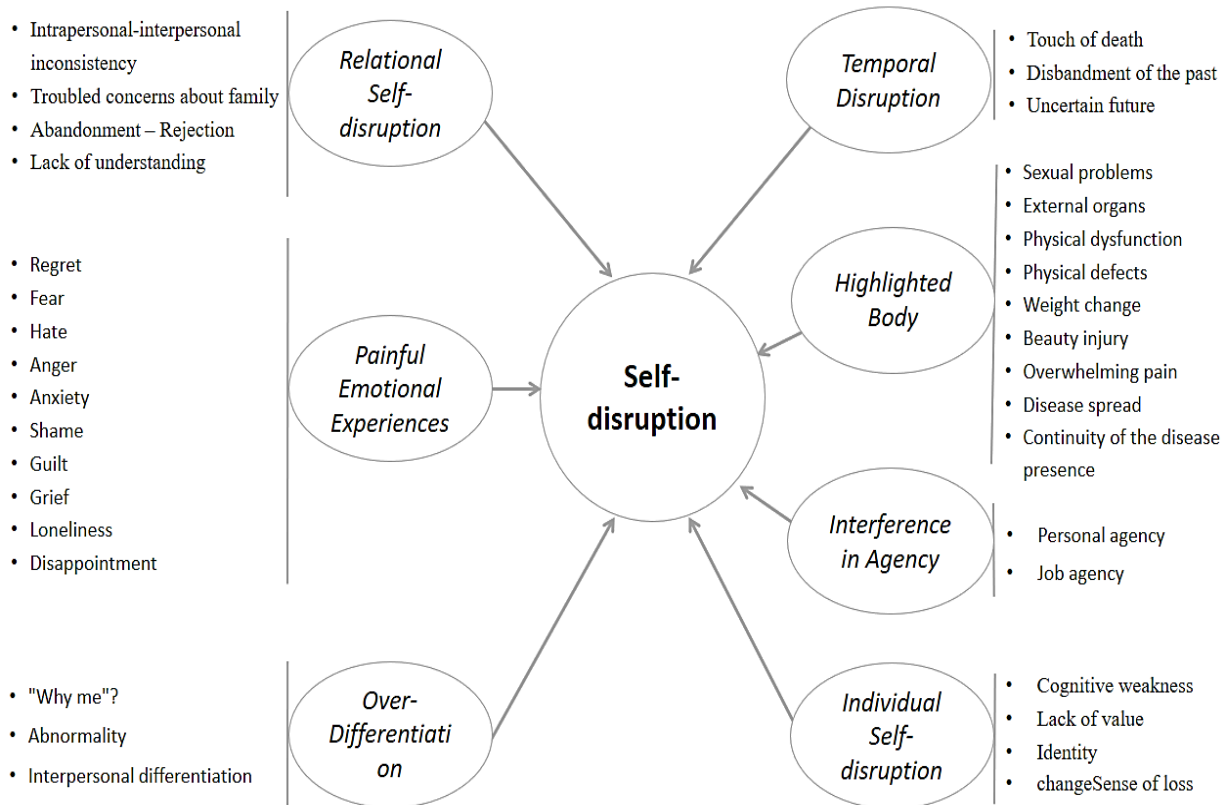


Figure 1. Categories of experiencing Sense of Self (Self-Disruption) in Cancer Survivors

Table 1. Main categories and sample codes of Sense of Self (Self-Disruption) in cancer survivors

Main Categories	Sample Codes
Temporal Disruption	All cancer patients feel that they have lost the lives three to nil, they have lost whatever they have done from the beginning to the present (interviewee M)".
Highlighted Body	I think I am another imperfect creature right now, ... that day I told my husband that I am no longer a woman at all, so I am imperfect, I no longer have the organs that a woman should have (due to the uterine injury and surgery) (interviewee E).
Interference in Agency	Compared to before my illness, I lost a lot of ability to do tasks. Well, one of my hands does not work much as before. I have to be dependent on others, while I was independent before; this issue bothers me (interviewee J).
Individual Self-disruption	am very different from the person I was before; one varies very much. I was completely another person before. I was very good. I am not like the previous person at all. This problem hurts me (interviewee B).

Relational Self-disruption	Ninety percent of people with cancer, like me, are those who are not seen by those around them, and have put them aside (interviewee B).
Over-Differentiation	The world is not fair at all and one feels at that moment why me? Repeatedly you say why me?; I am very different from people who do not suffer, in terms of my ability, in terms of my beauty (interviewee J).
Painful Emotional Experiences	Frustrations, regrets parade one by one in front of my face (interviewee N).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study showed that when people are diagnosed with cancer, different elements of their sense of self are disrupted. Consistency of these findings with the theoretical literature and previous research findings on the concept of "self" in general and in the population of chronic patients in particular, indicates the accuracy of these findings, which increases their reliability and generalizability. Although attempts were made to assess the diversity of experiences in terms of the severity of reaction to cancer, only those who had the desire to participate in the study were included in the study. These findings should be interpreted and used with caution, as they need to be tested in quantitative research first. Developing interventions for cancer survivors based on these findings could also be a purpose for future research.

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