





BECOMING MEDICAL SURVIVORS:

AUTHURS:

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on behalf of the Growing Up With Cancer Research Team*

Young People Disclosing
Cancer to New Friends
and Romantic Partners

BACKGROUND

The Growing up With Cancer project investigated the nature and extent of the impact of cancer illness and treatment on the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Friends and intimate relationships are a central part of growing up. Research on the psychosocial outcomes of cancer in adolescence and young adulthood report two different findings about the relationship between cancer survivors and their peers (Yi and Zebrack 2011; Whyte and Smith 1997):

- Peers reject the young person and lack understanding of their situation
- Peers are supportive, protective, attentive and sensitive to the young person's needs, and understanding of their situation

These findings relate to experiences with peers that young people knew prior to their cancer diagnosis and treatment. Little is known about the experience of disclosing a history of cancer – and being a cancer survivor – to new friends or potential romantic partners.

AIM

To describe young cancer survivors' experiences of telling new friends and romantic partners about their cancer history.

METHODS

Participants

 Adolescents and young adult cancer survivors aged between 16 and 29 years and diagnosed between 10 and 22 years

Recruitment

- Adult and paediatric haematology and oncology departments in Western Sydney
- CanTeen

Data Collection

 47 semi-structured interviews with 15 women and 12 men

Data Analysis

- Guided by the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969)
- Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of interview data

FINDINGS

Participants had difficulty telling new people about their cancer history

Participants reported that they did not always like the prospect of introducing their cancer history into new relationships.

Some participants found the anticipation of telling new people difficult.

What I hate is when I meet new people and I know I'm going to have to tell them and so I try and get it out of the way as, basically try and tell them within 5 minutes or so ... (Bill, 18)

Some participants avoided situations where they felt they should tell new friends or potential romantic partners about their cancer history because they did not know how to talk about it.

So I think that for me to be in a relationship they'd have to understand my context, ... they'd have to understand my experience with cancer ... and that's very difficult to explain to someone that you meet at a bar [laugh]. (Alice, 29)

Participants implied that they were concerned about evoking an adverse response by telling new people of their cancer history.

Participants' experience of telling new people about their cancer history

Despite the difficulties, participants reported that they still chose to tell new friends and potential romantic partners about their cancer history.

Some did so deliberately and early in their new relationship:

... the difference is that now if I meet a new person I'll tell them [about my cancer] pretty quickly, like I used to have this giant screening process where I had to make sure that I was close friends with them and all the rest. But now it's really an irrelevant part of my, yeah my history ... (Dilshara, 18)

Others did so gradually as the relationship developed:

And then [my wife] was just saying ... she would have asked me as our relationship progressed. ... I had an 18th video that was put together for me with a whole lot of home videos from when I was younger and things and part of that had pictures of me in hospital and things and I think it was just a gradual thing. Like, I didn't sit down with her and say, "Oh, look this is me, I had this cancer and that cancer," and just went through it. It was progressively, yeah, just talked about. (Mick, 29)

New people reportedly responded positively to being told about participants' cancer history

No participant reported adverse responses to deliberately telling new people about their cancer history.

... this guy that I'm seeing, he reacted really well to it. He is 30 so he's older, so he's a lot more mature, which is good ... I like dating older guys because they can, I think they can handle it better than someone that's 21 or 22. But and he was really good and he's like, "Oh well, whatever. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." And he's been, he's fine with it all. Well he's seen me again after it, so [laughs] ... (Courtney, 21)

And they reported that telling new people was not as bad as they'd anticipated

I just wanted to be really upfront. I just told him that I had cancer. Actually, I forgot. I actually told him, because that day, before I was going to see him, I was actually seeing my doctor that day for my annual check-up, and yeah, he just knew that I was going to see my doctor that day, he didn't know what for. And then later on when I saw him, I said, "Do you want to know why I saw – to see my doctor today?" and he said, "Yeah," so I told him. Was telling him as bad as you imagined? No (Mahalya, 22)

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that young cancer survivors experience difficulties telling new people about their cancer history, consistent with existing literature on telling other people of their cancer diagnosis. Despite these difficulties, young cancer survivors do tell new people about their cancer history.

Telling new people about a cancer history can become less difficult with time. However, there remain circumstances in which telling new people about a cancer history is still difficult for young cancer survivors.

It may be important for young people to have opportunities to tell new people of their cancer history early in their survivorship. This may be facilitated more easily after discussion with more experienced survivor peers about strategies for effective disclosure to prospective new friends and partners.

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