

People treated for breast cancer can continue to experience multi-dimensional problems, even years after treatment has been completed and as the duration of follow-up shortens, there is a greater potential for these needs to go unmet.

Cancer survivorship is a concept that encompasses the multi-dimensional aspects of quality of life and the experiences that follow cancer. It is important that health care professionals do not assume that the individual has no subsequent needs even if their cancer treatment has been successful. Numerous studies exploring the experience of surviving breast cancer report similar recurring themes. These can be broadly categorised into emotional, physical, social, spiritual and informational.

Even when deemed in remission, people continue to face problems arising from the chronic nature of breast cancer. Emotional needs include fear of recurrence and death (living with uncertainty), feelings of injustice and anger, anxiety, depression, altered body image integrity, loss of control and problems with relationships. Information needs are thus likely to persist over time, whilst contact with healthcare professionals may diminish.

Breast cancer will inevitably impact on physical well-being and people commonly experience unresolved physical symptoms, largely arising from treatments. These include pain, fatigue, lymphoedema, impaired fertility and menopausal symptoms. Similarly there may be a significant impact on social functioning, such as ongoing difficulties with family support, concerns for children, financial difficulties, an altered insurance risk status and employment problems.

Strategies for addressing the key issues arising after breast cancer treatment include information about possible long-term effects and support with self-management techniques.