

Is Cancer a Traumatic Experience for Children?: An Evaluation of “Has the Traumatic Impact of Cancer Been Overestimated?”

Is cancer a traumatic experience for children? At first thought, almost anyone asked this question would most likely say yes. But according to a study run at St Jude Children's Research Hospital, only 23.8% of children found cancer traumatic five years after recovering from the disease⁵. Based on what this study concludes, cancer in children show no evidence of increased PTSD or PTSS in youths with cancer, and highlight the ability of a child to bounce back in the face of challenges⁵. While evidence of PTSD may not be prevalent, the study claims that the traumatism of cancer is overestimated using only the scientific data derived from their study, without addressing outside evidence^{4,5}. There appears to be contradictions and stark comparisons between this study's findings and that of reports from certain cancer survivors as well as other studies looking at similar data. In order to evaluate the claims made in this investigation, a comparison of this study as well as other studies and testimonies needs to be completed to determine just how traumatic cancer is in youth

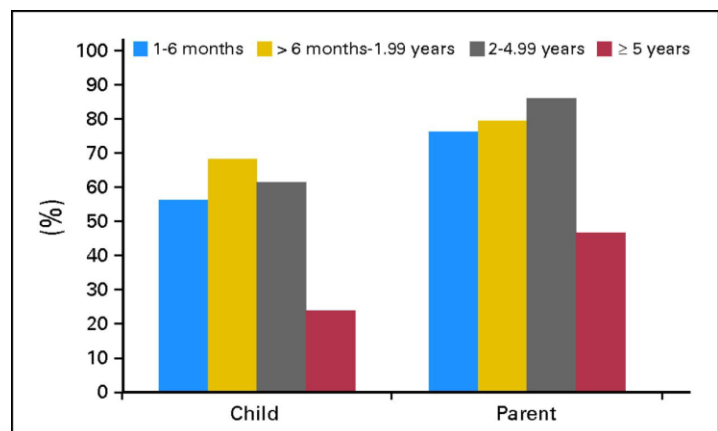
The Study

The study in question is “Posttraumatic Stress and Psychological Growth in Children With Cancer: Has the Traumatic Impact of Cancer Been Overestimated?”, which was conducted by researchers out of St. Jude’s Children Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee⁵. Participants were between the ages of 8-17 under one month from their diagnosis of a malignant cancer⁵. The control group was similar to the cancer group in every way except for the cancer diagnosis. Through a series of surveys over the course of 5+ years, the researchers tried to understand whether or not cancer was traumatic and/or caused PTSD or PTSS (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)⁵. Within these surveys, the researchers asked both parent and child about their most stressful or traumatic life event without preemptive orientation to cancer, in addition to conducting multiple interviews with parents and child to discern any signs PTSD in the child⁵.

As visible in Figure 1, there was a significant amount of individuals claimed cancer was a traumatic experience in their life, but after five year, only 25% of parents and children had cancer was a traumatic experience⁵. Based on this significant decrease as well as other routine interviews, the researchers concluded that there was no evidence for PTSD in children who experienced cancer. The researchers sighted in the journal that these stats highlight the capacity of children to adjust and thrive in the face of adversity⁵.

Overall, this study does not cover every aspect of cancer, seemingly limiting cancer to just one form and not covering a diverse range of perspectives. Looking at the study, it seems as though the participants did not incur any metastasis following their treatment. In addition, the study had only a 68% participation rate, possibly discluding

Figure 1: Percent of Child and Parent that



those patients that were overly-psychologically distressed by their cancer⁵. Despite these limitations, the study concluded that the traumatic impact of cancer has in fact been overestimated, based on the data that there is no evidence of PTSD amongst children with cancer five years after remission. In order to properly evaluate these claims, more sources will have to be brought in from other perspectives.

A Second Perspective

While this data lays its basis in scientific research, it makes claims that are not supplemented by personal experience as well as diverse perspective. In order to present a proper evaluation of this study, personal experiences will have to be brought in to understand how traumatic cancer is on a personal level. According to Jason Hungerford, survivor of colorectal cancer as a young adult, cancer changes how you go about your everyday life. In the future certain “things don't work” as a result of cancer, in reference to certain body functions. In addition to this, Jason explained how dietary changes were a necessity after his cancer to remain healthy. While all of these life changes are fairly dramatic, there are were signs of PTSD or traumatization in Jason's description of his cancer. Especially sitting in with him during the CRC Young Adult Group, he seemed as though he has coped well with his cancer and is now able to use his experiences to help others move on.

Looking at another more drastic cancer case, the story of Elliot who, at the age of 16 was diagnosed with alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma - a rare type of soft tissue cancer¹. He underwent four cycles of chemo and was then also forced to have below the knee amputation on his right leg¹. By the end of 2014 he was declared cancer free, only to have him re-diagnosed with cancer in July of 2015 and then again in 2016 on the same right leg¹. But despite the horrible bouts of cancer that Elliot faces, he has maintained a positive outlook, and has continued to document his journey on blogs and social media¹. Having a cancer experience so horrible has not yet shaken him mentally, but only caused him to adopt new life changes, including a prosthetic leg¹. Based on his blog posts, he is unwavering, showing no open signs of PTSD in his blog posts. While it is impossible for me to diagnose PTSD or PTSS by reading someone's blog, it is obvious to see that Elliot continues to fight and post on his social media despite the worst outcomes, suggesting even the slightest that he is not permanently traumatized by his cancer.

Bringing in my one final perspective from my own life, I conducted an interview with my childhood friend Doyle Hagany had been diagnosed with ALL (acute lymphocytic leukemia) at the age of 10 years old². After about two years of suffering from cancer, Doyle returned to school and eventually sports. Now 18 years old, Doyle has recovered fully physically from cancer, and claims that his “outlook on life is more positive” despite losing two years of a normal childhood².

For all three different perspectives, cancer has obviously had life changing impacts, but has not left the survivor with a lingering mental trauma or PTSD, confirming the findings of the study in that regard. However, one cannot underestimate the impact that cancer has on the individual, which this study fails to recognize.

Study Comparison

In order to validate or disprove the results of the study in question, it is necessary to compare its data with that of another similar study. One study run in 2004 called “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS) in Families of Adolescent

Childhood Cancer Survivors” used a similar method, in which about 150 patients were interviewed in person and over the phone.³ The only difference between this study and the one in question is the timeframe, as the 2004 study occurs during and only shortly after the patient's treatment^{3,5}. The 2004 study concluded that 23% of patients experienced PTSD in some form in the timeframe of the study. In this study, even *less* patients reported PTSD symptoms during cancer treatment than the study run by St. Jude’s, therefore confirming the findings of the St. Jude study^{3,5}.

Even when comparing the study in question to another study similar in design, the result is the same. Some patients report PTSD during or right after treatment, but this number slowly fades as time goes on, confirming that cancer is less of a traumatic event for children than normally thought^{3,4}.

Conclusion

While it is fair to say that cancer does not usually leave a traumatic, PTSD-like effect on its patients, one cannot underestimate the impact that cancer leaves on the lives of its patients. Whether that impact ranges from dietary changes to losing an entire leg, there is a distinct mark left on cancer patients that is remembered throughout their lives. Therefore, the study “Posttraumatic Stress and Psychological Growth in Children With Cancer: Has the Traumatic Impact of Cancer Been Overestimated?” is confirmed, but still leaves out major details that should have been addressed in a more respectfully worded manner. While children and young adults have been shown the ability to bounce back, as confirmed by the comparison study and the personal testimonies, cancer will always leave an undeniable mark that should not be understated.

Works Cited

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