



The Journey of Accepting What You Consider to be An 'Unacceptable' Body

Have you ever felt that your body was not what you wanted it to be? Even if you never felt this way, you might learn something new by reading this, or maybe you'll put it down because it is not something of interest to you at all. If you've continued reading then maybe you're a student studying cancer, maybe you're a cancer patient who recently got diagnosed, maybe you're just curious about how breast cancer and body image are related, or maybe you're someone who has had or has an eating disorder and wants to read about someone else's story.

I am a 19-year-old college student who doesn't have cancer, but had symptoms of anorexia, which is why I am overly conscious about my body. Body image, body dissatisfaction, self-confidence, self-image, and body appreciation are all terms that are very present in my life. At this point in my life, the

mirror is my worst enemy. Looking at myself in the mirror not only brings back memories of how my body used to look like when I was more pleased with it but very unhealthy, but also it makes me hate my body and want it to look like as I imagine a perfect body looks like. I have always struggled somewhat with body image. However, in the past year or so, I have really been worried about it and it has been something that is constantly on my mind. After having gone through a period during which my health went downhill because of insufficient nutrition, I have had to begin dealing with consuming more than I used to, and therefore, struggling even more with body image. On the positive side, however, it was a learning experience. As ironic as it may sound, body dissatisfaction has led me to body appreciation.

Body appreciation is a learning process that takes a long time. It may even take a whole lifetime. Being aware of body appreciation is the first step in the right direction. The one thing that has stuck with me since my learning journey began is that thanking your body for all that it does and is responsible for during every second that we are alive is essential. Not only does body positivity change your perspective towards your body, but it also has a positive chemical response inside it. We usually have the tendency to not appreciate our bodies or think about all of the functions it has and successfully fulfills while we're living. But we should all really learn to love our bodies because they are truly amazing.

The reason why I became interested in doing research and learning about breast cancer was because of the connection that it has to body image, and I personally have a strong

Self-image: “the idea of one’s abilities, appearance, and personality”
(Oxford University Dictionary)

Self-esteem: “confidence in one’s own worth or abilities,” also referred to as one’s “self-respect”
(Oxford University Dictionary)

Self-concept: “an idea of the self constructed from the beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others”
(Oxford University Dictionary)

personal connection to body image. So I thought that linking these two concepts would produce valuable knowledge and eventually lead to questions about how breast cancer patients deal with body dissatisfaction.

Dimensions of Breast Cancer

The image on the left is *Beauty Out of Damage*, an image of Matuschka, a breast cancer activist who had breast cancer. It appeared in the New York Times in 1993, and sparked a lot of controversy at the time because people weren't used to seeing 'nudity' and especially not women who had had surgery for breast cancer on public media. This image, which was retrieved from the official Beauty Out of Damage webpage, is now an icon of breast cancer, and portrays the reality about its effect on women's bodies. Although it does suggest that this woman in particular was able to overcome the body image struggles that breast cancer entails, it does not show the other side of breast cancer, the one that portrays that some women feel unsure about their bodies after surgery, which in turn affects their self-image and persona. These women would most likely benefit more from consistent support from individuals or group experiences aimed at lessening the worry and insecurity around their new bodies.



Breast cancer affects one in twelve women in the United States over the course of their lifetime (Breastcancer.org). As with most types of cancers, breast cancer is relatively easy to treat when women are diagnosed in the early stages of the disease. If the cancer in the breasts metastasizes, however, it is

more complicated to treat, and has higher chances of being deadly in a shorter period of time.

As a society, we think that the hardest part of dealing with breast cancer is the treatment and the emotional issues around possible mortality from the disease. But actually, for at least some women it is as much about body image as it is about survival. Women affected by breast cancer usually have the option of getting a lumpectomy or a single or double mastectomy. Which treatment they opt for depends on the size of the tumor and personal choice. Carol Smith*, a woman who had breast cancer and is now cancer-free, explained that women with a desire to minimize the potential risk of the recurrence of the cancer usually opt for mastectomy, while women who wish to mostly conserve the shape and size of their breasts tend to get a lumpectomy to remove just the tumor. Lumpectomies are much more local since they target only the tumor and as a result, are less destructive to the breasts. However, the recurrence of breast cancer after having had a lumpectomy is higher than after having had a mastectomy.

Treatment, as a matter of fact, can also have other effects on the body, such as “decreased range of motion, [...] weight gain, and muscle loss [...]” (Brunet, Sabiston, and Burke). As a result, many women end up experiencing body image and body dissatisfaction during and after treatment, which negatively affects their mentality and hence, their behavior. Due to the fact that body image struggles have been seen repeatedly in patients, there are places that specialize in post-treatment care by offering group activities, therapy, and support, among other services that contribute to the well being of the survivors.

Struggling with Breast Cancer

With the diagnosis of breast cancer come struggles, mainly in the realm of psychological issues. The most common issues are present in the experiences with partners, family members, co-workers, and other people that the diagnosed person interacts with.

On top of the struggles with relationships, patients face internal struggles as well. We might think that people who have body image issues are troubled by the judgment of others. But these issues tend to be internal, and when faced with them in relation to breast cancer, the struggle is internal. Body image and sexuality are two of the main concerns that patients deal with during and after treatment. Does having a mastectomy mean that one has lost one's womanhood and femininity? The response to this question is very dependent on the individual. Some women embrace it. Others opt for reconstructive surgery. And others sometimes decide to get a tattoo to cover the scar. The options of how to deal with such a surgery are finite. Deena Metzger, a breast cancer survivor, decided to get a tattoo to cover up the scar that the single mastectomy that she had left on her chest. She had someone photograph her, as shown in the picture below, and she wrote a poem to accompany the picture, quoted to the left of it. She has embraced the scar and is not afraid to show it.

Going back to womanhood and breast cancer, it is important to note that in the US society, breasts are an important part of a woman's sense of being a woman. Breasts are

“I am no longer afraid of mirrors where
I see the sign of the amazon, the one
who shoots arrows.
There was a fine red line across my
chest where a knife entered,
but now a branch winds about the scar
and travels from arm to heart.
Green leaves cover the branch, grapes
hang there and a bird appears.
What grows in me now is vital and does
not cause me harm. I think the bird is
singing.
I have relinquished some of the scars.
I have designed my chest with the care
given to an illuminated manuscript.
I am no longer ashamed to make love.
Love is a battle I can win.
I have the body of a warrior who does
not kill or wound.
On the book of my body, I have
permanently inscribed a tree.”



sometimes the main reason for a woman feeling confident about her body, especially in the US. What does that mean for an American woman who has to undergo surgery to remove her breasts in order to treat breast cancer? In cultures that are not as obsessed with women’s breasts it may be easier for the women to embrace the surgery, but in the US it may be harder, which explains why many women opt for reconstructive surgery. Some use it as an excuse to get the breast size that they always desired. In the US, up to 50% of women request a breast reconstruction after a mastectomy. Those who choose to get plastic surgery either have an “immediate reconstruction whereby the breast is reconstructed at the same time as mastectomy,” or delay the reconstruction until the patient recovers from surgery (Crompvoets).

In her book, Breast Cancer and the Post-Surgical Body, Samantha Crompvoets claims that “the mastectomized body presents a disruption to both a social and a self-identity.” Women experience a major struggle in coming to terms with, concealing, and accepting their post-surgical body partly due to

the ideal that exists surrounding what women's bodies should look like. This ideal is so popularized and celebrated, that many women strive for a body that reflects this ideal. So what happens when we use words like normal and average to describe a woman's body? This sets us up to think that any deviation from "the norm" is abnormal and disfigured. Women who have to go through breast cancer treatment most likely feel this way, because even if they considered their body to be normal before surgery, their new body is anything but normal. Language is so powerful in this context that we really need to use our words wisely and redefine what some words such as "normal" mean.

Discussion about Breast Cancer Treatment

As mentioned above, breast cancer treatment often means having to get a single or a double mastectomy. Considering the effect that this surgery has on patients' bodies, which is different for everyone, it is expected that everyone will decide to deal with it in their own way. For some women, womanhood is more about the physical appearance than anything else. In our society, we have the power to choose what our body will look like. Breast reconstruction, tattoos, and prosthetic bras are only some of the options that women who have had mastectomies can opt for. However, the decision to get plastic surgery could have further consequences, such as later in life regretting the decision to get such large breasts.

The negative effects of cancer treatment on women's bodies seem to be overlooked by professionals. According to

Carol Smith, the breast cancer survivor whom I interviewed, after chemotherapy and radiation her reproductive system shut down, and currently she is experiencing vaginal dryness and osteopenic symptoms, the symptoms that occur before the onset of osteoporosis. In addition, she gets occasional hot flashes as a side effect of her hormone treatment. She also provided me with insight about why it is that younger women tend to get breast reconstruction. Carol said, “breast cancer is a particular threat to the way that we see ourselves as sexually desirable, as having the ability to attract people,” so younger women like her tend to prefer the least destructive treatments because their sexuality is less at stake than if both of their breasts were to be removed. So sexuality and attraction are major reasons behind what treatment women affected by breast cancer opt for.

Most of us assume that only women can get breast cancer. However, this is not the case. Men can get breast cancer, although the occurrence of this is much less common. However, breast cancer is so associated with women, that men who have it struggle that much more.

Coping with Breast Cancer

There are several movements that advocate for breast cancer and spread awareness about the disease that affects many women yearly. For example, the famous pink ribbon symbolizes efforts to find a cure for breast cancer. However, it has been a symbol that has sparked much controversy. While the pink ribbon did do a lot to raise awareness and bring attention to breast cancer, it also came with another point of view, which

was that it became more of a brand name, as corporations began selling their products with the pink ribbon on them, which created a fad for the symbol. If you're interested in learning more about pink ribbon, I recommend that you read [Pink Ribbons, Inc.](#), a book that not only tells the story of the pink ribbon, but also “shows how personal strength and optimism on the part of breast cancer survivors, alongside the research money that is generated by institutions and practices of consumer-oriented philanthropy, are not framed as the most effective tools for fighting the battle against the disease” (King).

Resources for coping mechanisms include social support, a sense of control, and self-esteem. Some of the coping strategies that professionals recommend are journaling, relying on faith, and turning to family and friends for instrumental and emotional support. As a woman said, “[...] joking, especially in sexualized ways, enabled the women to acknowledge the emotional discomfort they were experiencing.” There is also evidence that women who are “dispositionally optimistic” are able to cope better with the physical effects of breast cancer and its treatment than women who are not (Clark).

Mary, a breast cancer survivor, told me about her coping strategies. She said that patients and survivors need to use their intellect, in that “[they] shouldn't waste [their] precious youth thinking about the future.” Mary doesn't worry about breast cancer anymore. She has done what she considers a coping strategy: she has broken the feedback loop that leaves others consistently anxious about the recurrence of cancer.

Breast cancer and the struggles that it brings with body image is a subject that can definitely be given more attention by professionals. Through this paper, I tried to use my experience as a credible and primary source of knowledge to learn more about what connection body dissatisfaction has with breast cancer.

As with any type of cancer, breast cancer is a disease that brings many complications to the lives of its victims. One of the best pieces of advice that I would like to receive if I am recovering from breast cancer is “find your new normal.” Trying to go back to your old self is difficult after having been drastically changed both physically and emotionally.

As Cromptvoets writes, “the current treatment of the post-surgical body within breast cancer culture and wider society allows no space for women to reconceptualize their bodies as normal, feminine or complete in the absence of a breast or breasts. Instead, the mastectomized body is positioned as transient, to be ‘fixed’ as soon as possible. [...] Breast reconstruction or wearing a prosthesis are essentially the only mechanisms presented and “available for women to renegotiate a complete sense of self” (Cromptvoets).

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*Carol Smith was used as a pseudonym as the woman preferred not to reveal
her real identity.