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**JOURNEYS IN UNDERSTANDING:
FINDING MEANING IN THE
EXPERIENCE OF CANCER**

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University*

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I mean, in a way, what I'm hoping will come out of your study is that maybe people will realise, - have a much greater understanding of the journey that people with cancer go on, and the stages that they move through, rather than, like, let's just attend to their physical well being and then hopefully, they can just slot back in to the life that they had before. (Kate)

ABSTRACT

Experiencing serious illness holds significance in peoples' lives in ways that go beyond the actual medical condition. Research has found that finding meaning in traumatic life events, such as serious and life threatening illness, is an important part of coping. Having cancer is widely agreed to be the kind of event that would be very traumatic for almost anyone. There may be difficulty in relating to such an event without at the same time experiencing a sense of loss of meaning in life. The focus of the study was on the processes of finding meaning and aspects of the experience that may impact, either positively or negatively, on the ability to find meaning. Five male and six female adults were interviewed about their personal experience of having cancer. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used in order to be open to the structures of meanings in individual lived experience. Findings showed that apart from differences in individual contexts that impacted on the nature of the experience of cancer, the quality of interactions were influential in finding meaning in what had happened. Interconnectedness with others was vital for a sense of self-worth, belonging and commitment to life. The experience of suffering meant that people were brought face to face with the vulnerability of human life. Regaining a sense of life as meaningful was a process involving the integration of the illness implications into perceptions of the self, others and life in general. Through personally experiencing the reality of human vulnerability and the limits of personal control there grew possibilities for a greater acceptance of life as it is, increased tolerance for others and a sense of communality with them, and a growth in self awareness. Personal control was regained through taking responsibility over choices of how to respond to such an event. Regaining control in ways that were achievable signalled an acceptance too of those things that were beyond control. There were re-evaluations about what was important in life. A general change in life focus incorporated the realities of what had happened, thus making them more understandable. A process for finding meaning in the experience of cancer is suggested, and aspects of the experience of illness that are influential in this process are proposed. The search for meaning in serious illness is an ongoing process and participants were at different stages in the journey of understanding. Greater understanding of the lived experience of cancer helps in raising general levels of sensitivity and awareness of the personal crisis that going through such a serious illness means.

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