

Denial among Women Living with Cancer: An Exploratory Study to Understand the Consequences of Cancer and the Denial Mechanism

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Abstract : Because of the rising number of new cases of cancer, especially among women, it is more than essential to better understand how women experience cancer in order to bring them adapted to support and care and enhance their well-being and patient experience. Cancer stands for a traumatic experience in which the diagnosis, its medical treatments, and the related side effects lead to deep physical and psychological changes that may arouse considerable stress and anxiety. In order to reduce these negative emotions, women tend to use various defense mechanisms, among which denial has been defined as the most frequent mechanism used by breast cancer patients. This study aims to better understand the consequences of the experience of cancer and their link with the adoption of a denial strategy. The empirical research was done among female cancer survivors in France. Since the topic of this study is relatively unexplored, a qualitative methodology and open-ended interviews were employed. In total, 25 semi-directive interviews were conducted with a female with different cancers, different stages of treatment, and different ages. A systematic inductive method was performed to analyze data. The content analysis enabled to highlight three different denial-related behaviors among women with cancer, which serve a self-protective function. First, women who expressed high levels of anxiety confessed they tended to completely deny the existence of their cancer immediately after the diagnosis of their illness. These women mainly exhibit many fears and a deep distrust toward the medical context and professionals. This coping mechanism is defined by the patient as being unconscious. Second, other women deliberately decided to deny partial information about their cancer, whether this information is related to the stages of the illness, the emotional consequences, or the behavioral consequences of the illness. These women use this strategy as a way to avoid the reality of the illness and its impact on the different aspects of their life as if cancer does not exist. Third, some women tend to reinterpret and give meaning to their cancer as a way to reduce its impact on their life. To this end, they may use magical thinking or positive reframing, or reinterpretation. Because denial may lead to delays in medical treatments, this topic deserves a deep investigation, especially in the context of oncology. As denial is defined as a specific defense mechanism, this study contributes to the existing literature in service marketing which focuses on emotions and emotional regulation in healthcare services which is a crucial issue. Moreover, this study has several managerial implications for healthcare professionals who interact with patients in order to implement better care and support for the patients.

Keywords : cancer, coping mechanisms, denial, healthcare services

Conference Title : ICHMM 2022 : International Conference on Hospitality Management and Marketing

Conference Location : Jerusalem, Israel

Conference Dates : November 29-30, 2022