‘The new normal’ - breast cancer survivors' experiences of coping with chemotherapy-related cognitive defects

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‘Chemobrain’

Cognitive impairment or dysfunction reported by patients following chemotherapy

Results in impairment in:
- Short-term memory
- Concentration and attention
- Finding words
- Multi-tasking
- Mental and physical fatigue

Up to 75% of patients with tumours report chemobrain symptoms DURING treatment

Around 30% have lasting effects
Illness representations of chemobrain: initial experiences and long term adjustment to ‘the new normal’

Identity
- forgetfulness, confusion, ‘feeling fuzzy’ -> chemobrain

Causes
- chemotherapy, uncertainty and speculation about other factors: fear, rumination, cognitive overload

Timeline
- all reported some improvement

Control
- frustration -> acceptance, some control through brain training, self-taught memory prompts.

Consequences
- relationship, role changes; hiding – fear of other’s negative appraisals

Information from HCP
Coping with chemobrain: Implications for Post Breast Cancer Support

• Need for greater acknowledgment and guidance on chemobrain.
• Reassurance through information needs – diagnosis/recognition from HCP first step…
• Social support needs
• Coping techniques (brain training and memory prompts)

Take home message: stage-related adjustment support for chemobrain should be an important part of the breast cancer survival care package.