

# Wearing the Mask of Wellness: The Experience of Young Women Living With Advanced Breast Cancer

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**PURPOSE:** To describe and interpret the lived experiences of young women with advanced breast cancer.

**PARTICIPANTS & SETTING:** 12 women, aged 25–39 years with advanced breast cancer, were recruited from private Facebook groups for women with breast cancer.

**METHODOLOGIC APPROACH:** Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenologic method was used. Data were collected through one or more semi-structured interviews over a six-month period. Analysis was conducted using NVivo, version 11.

**FINDINGS:** The participants' multidimensional experiences were described by the overarching theme of wearing the mask of wellness in the presence of life-threatening illness.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING:** This study provides insight into the experiences of young women living with advanced breast cancer. Because these women may not appear ill to the general population, their needs and struggles are not well understood. The results of this study can be a baseline for additional research and clinical interventions.

**KEYWORDS** advanced cancer; breast cancer; unmet needs; coping; quality of life; qualitative research

**ONF, 46(3), 329–337.**

**DOI** 10.1188/19.ONF.329-337

**Y**oung adult women with breast cancer often face a disease that is clinically more aggressive and has lower survival rates compared to those who are older (Korde et al., 2015; Partridge et al., 2014). When most young women are diagnosed, they are still developing their identities, finding their place in the world, establishing their careers, developing their relationships, and building their families (Chen, Parmar, & Gartshore, 2014; Cleeland et al., 2014; Shaha & Bauer-Wu, 2009). Limited research on the specific needs of this group of women exists, and even less literature studies the day-to-day experiences of young adult women living with an advanced-stage disease. This article describes a hermeneutic qualitative study of the meaning of living with advanced breast cancer for a cohort of young women. Findings are presented and implications for additional research and clinical interventions are discussed.

## Background

Young women with advanced breast cancer are likely to experience vulnerabilities that differ from those experienced by older women, particularly in terms of the psychological and emotional burdens of living with an advanced disease. In addition, the physical and functional challenges that accompany this disease and its treatment can further exacerbate emotional burdens. Often, these young women are living with, and enduring, a disease that is likely to claim their lives prematurely and unexpectedly.

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women younger than age 40 years (National Cancer Institute, 2018). Excluding accidental deaths, breast cancer is the leading cause of death for women aged 20–39 years, and studies indicate that additional research with this population is needed across all aspects of the cancer continuum (DeRouen et al.,