Examining the ongoing effects of cancer on young people's relationships

BACKGROUND

Adolescence (12 – 17 years of age) and emerging adulthood (18 – 25 years of age) are periods of rapid and dramatic change in young people's physical, psychological, and social development. Few events can cause such challenging alterations to the process of transition from childhood to adulthood as the onset of a serious illness like cancer. Much is known about the physical and psychological consequences of having cancer during adolescence and young adulthood. However, we have more to learn about the effects of cancer on young people's relationships. The "Growing Up With Cancer" study aimed to determine the nature and extent of the impact of cancer on the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

METHODS

Participants
- Adolescents and emerging adult cancer survivors aged between 16 and 29 years who were diagnosed between 10 and 22 years ago
- Participants diagnosed in early or mid-adolescence said that their close relationship with their parents continued post-treatment.

Data Collection
- 48 semi-structured interviews with 15 women and 12 men with various cancer diagnoses and haematological malignancies

Data Analysis
- Thematic analysis of interview data guided by theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism

FININDINGS

Relationships with Parents

Some participants diagnosed in early adolescence often developed closer relationships with their parents because of the concentrated time they spent together during hospitalisation discussing weighty topics of life and death.

... when I was in the hospital and had to talk to my mum and she just talks to me more about how she feels about my stepdad and coming from [her country] to Australia and how hard life is in [her country] ... so I could get a better perspective of that. (Mahaya, 22).

Some participants diagnosed in early or mid-adolescence said that their close relationship continued post-treatment.

... now I tell my mum about every single aspect of my life. ... I tell all my bits of my social life, I tell my friends' secrets to my mum, we share absolutely everything now. (Malcolm, 17)

Some participants diagnosed at 18 years or older depended on their parents for care and some moved back into the family home. They became positioned (again) as children within their family, which could mean a loss of independence.

... moving home was probably one of the hardest things to do [because you lose] all your independence. Even simple things like I love cooking and going to not cooking, your independence. Even simple things like I love cooking and going to not cooking, your independence.

... I've naturally fallen into the role of advisor or counsellor. I guess with my cancer I feel like it gave me a lot of wisdom, and that grounding from that, and so they'll naturally come to me for advice. (Dilsasha, 18)

Cancer illness and treatment altered the appearance of participants of all ages which frequently resulted in heightened levels of attention from their peers. Some attention was stigmatising. For example, one participant described returning to her local night club with a marked physical change - baldness:

I get a few lesbian comments here and there like, "are you a lesbian?" or whatever. "No I have cancer". But apart from that I had strangers just walk up to me and be like good on you for being out and having a drink and you look awesome ... they'd be "you're a real hero dancing and all that kind of stuff and you have cancer". Self-esteem wise it helped heaps. (Jo, 21)

But attention could also be/knewing, for example, when acquaintances acted in an overly friendly manner. Either way, heightened levels of attention marked participants out as different to their peers, and made it difficult for them to fit back in to their peer groups.

CONCLUSION

Cancer is a complex social, relational, interpersonal, and continuing influence on people's lives and so it creates both difference and the necessity for accommodation. Accommodation is a dynamic process that requires reciprocity, flexibility, and adaptability not only in the survivors of cancer but in the relationships that they have and that they make. Young people who survive cancer and their parents, peers, and new romantic partners must negotiate how they will accommodate the ongoing effects of cancer into their daily lives.