

## **Summary of the Doctoral Thesis**

### **“Senses and meanings attributed by adolescents to their cancer experiences”**

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#### **The aim of the study and its scientific justification**

The subject of this theoretical and exploratory research conducted within the qualitative research framework was the meanings and senses that adolescents attribute to their cancer experiences. The goal was to describe and interpret these meanings and senses. The research question was: What meanings and senses do adolescents attribute to their cancer-related experiences? The research subject and objectives align with the interpretative paradigm and are consistent with the chosen research approach – interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The justification for researching this topic includes the fact that cancer is considered a critical life event. Its occurrence is associated with unpredictability and a sudden change in daily living. This can be an especially difficult time for adolescents due to the simultaneous developmental changes occurring in their bodies on multiple levels. Moreover, the theoretical perspective adopted in this research has not been previously utilized in Poland to explore the meanings and senses attributed by adolescents to their cancer experiences. Furthermore, these experiences have rarely been studied in general. In international research, where phenomenological approaches (including IPA) are more commonly used, individual interpretations of adolescents regarding their cancer experiences are considered more often. This supports the planning of effective therapeutic and educational interventions. This research, therefore, expands knowledge about the Polish context.

#### **Research methodology**

The methodological framework for this research project was interpretative phenomenological analysis. Since IPA's main assumption is to obtain rich and detailed narratives and to present

each respondent's perspective, the study was conducted on a small, purposefully selected sample. The sample consisted of six respondents aged 16 to 18 years. Inclusion criteria included having experiences related to cancer; being in late adolescence (age 16-20); being a patient at the Pediatric, Hematology, and Oncology Clinic of Antoni Jurasz University Hospital No. 1 in Bydgoszcz; and being in treatment or up to two years post-treatment. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each respondent based on previously prepared guidelines. The data analysis involved making notes on the transcriptions, identifying themes within each case, reducing these themes, searching for patterns across the group, and preparing a comprehensive report containing interpretations and excerpts from the participants' statements.

## **Results and conclusions**

The analysis resulted in formulating eight overarching themes (fourth-level themes) common to the entire group, differentiated by the occurrence of third-level themes. These themes were discussed with an idiographic focus on the individual and considering the context in which they emerged in each respondent's case. The description and hierarchy of the discussed themes were determined by the following overarching, fourth-level themes: "cancer as an existential challenge: antagonist, punishment, and foundation for being there for others"; "illness and treatment leading to limitations in many areas"; "experience of loss and abandonment embedded in the process of illness and treatment"; "experiencing multidimensional suffering at different stages of illness and treatment"; "treatment as a path between the abnormal world of the sick and the normal world of the healthy"; "from conflicting, erroneous information and stereotypes about illness and cancer to knowledge based on personal experience and educating others"; "going through cancer and coping mechanisms – from shock and denial to positive"; "between expecting, receiving support, and giving it to others." The results were interpreted using selected theories and concepts related to the current state of knowledge, and additional research questions were formulated and answered in the conclusion. These questions concerned the developmental significance of the cancer experiences for the participants, why the respondents interpreted their illness experiences in a particular way, and how the identity of the respondents developed during their cancer experiences in adolescence.

The study revealed that the meanings and senses adolescents attributed to their cancer experiences were shaped by cultural norms and individual encounters with their own and others' illnesses. Additionally, cancer played a crucial role in shaping the identities of the participants. Many of them underwent an identity crisis, trying to reconcile their self-image as sick individuals with the desire to be perceived as "normal" young people. The participants faced

changes in their appearance and the limitations resulting from treatment, affecting their self-esteem and self-perception. Moreover, they had to redefine their role in peer groups and society. Many experienced isolation, rejection, and even stigmatization, further complicating their maturation process and the formation of interpersonal relationships. Cancer also prompted deep reflection on life, values, and priorities. It can be said that adolescents have matured emotionally and intellectually more quickly, which some have perceived as a positive change. The illness catalyzed their personal development, changing their approach to life, increasing their health awareness, and motivating them to set new life goals. Support from family, friends, medical staff, and other patients played a key role in coping with the disease. Adolescents particularly valued emotional and practical support and the opportunity to share their experiences with other patients.