External Stressors during Breast Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment: A Qualitative Study

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**Background**

External stressors such as financial strain or psychosocial issues can influence the trajectory of a patient’s breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to understand external stressors experienced by breast cancer survivors at the time of their diagnosis.

**Methods**

- The National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC) launched a quality improvement initiative—Patient Reported Observations on Medical Procedure Timeliness for Breast Patients (PROMPT)—to examine timeliness in breast cancer care at NAPBC sites across the U.S.
- 1-hour interviews were performed with 28 female breast cancer survivors treated for Stage 0-III breast cancer from 2019-2022
- 22 institutions across the U.S. were represented

**Theme 1: Psychosocial stressors**

“Devastating. I can’t even, I can’t even go any deeper into it. It was a very, very devastating time.”

**Theme 2: Financial stressors**

“But that’s where the financial worry just comes in because, here we are, six weeks out and chemo starting and we’re still dealing with unemployment insurance and whether or not I qualify.”

**Theme 3: Work-related stressors**

“I worked remotely . . . And it was more stressful to do that looking back. Now that I’m going through radiation, I should have just taken the time off.”

**Theme 4: Stressors related to a concurrent psychiatric or medical condition**

“I have hypothyroidism and fibromyalgia. So my energy level is already pretty low, and the radiation was just going to put me beneath my level.”

**Conclusion**

Breast cancer diagnosis is associated with unique external stressors that may be addressed through quality improvement initiatives with a focus on mental health and financial guidance.