

**UNDERSTANDING LIFE THREATENING
ILLNESS:
An Exploration of Individual Experiences and
Reflections
on Living with Cancer**

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ABSTRACT

“A few decades ago, cancer illness was a topic shrouded in social silence. Today...stories of cancer illness have found a place in our culture...The emergence of this discourse means that those who become ill with cancer can expect some degree of acceptance and understanding (Kleinmann, 1988). The same cannot be said, however, about all those who *survive* cancer. Despite the interest that is often generated by stories of survival...there still remain unresolved tensions for those who have lived beyond the acute phase of extreme experience (Frank, 1995)” (Little et al, 2002).

This study, inspired by my practice as a social worker in the field of palliative care, seeks to uncover and explore these “unresolved tensions” in the lives of those who have experienced cancer as a long-term condition. By means of conducting semi-structured interviews with 18 people who could be described as ‘living with and beyond cancer’, and analysing these narratives through a grounded theory approach, I sought to identify the meaning of this experience for these individuals, with the aim that these findings would inform future policy and practice in this sensitive area.

The themes that emerged from my study were that, in the main, individuals experienced cancer as not only life-threatening, but also life-changing, not only in terms of how they developed in terms of self-awareness, but also of how they related to the world around them. Issues of hope and fear are explored, along with the meaning of support and spirituality in the lives of the respondents, and the new perspectives that resulted from the experience of facing one’s own mortality and ‘living to tell the tale’ (Stacey, 1996).

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