



## Health Psychology Perspectives on Stress and Coping Strategies Among Cancer Survivors

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### Abstract

*This study explores stress experiences and coping strategies among cancer survivors from a health psychology perspective. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 25 cancer survivors recruited from oncology outpatient clinics and cancer support groups. The findings reveal that survivorship is characterized by persistent emotional stress, including fear of recurrence, anxiety, social isolation, and uncertainty regarding future health. To manage these challenges, survivors employed three interconnected coping mechanisms: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and meaning-focused coping. Problem-focused coping enhanced perceived control through treatment management and lifestyle adjustments, while emotion-focused coping facilitated emotional regulation through mindfulness, social support, and spirituality. Meaning-focused coping promoted resilience, gratitude, identity reconstruction, and personal growth. The findings contribute to health psychology literature and provide practical implications for developing comprehensive survivorship interventions that support long-term psychological well-being and quality of life.*

## INTRODUCTION

Cancer remains one of the most significant global public health challenges, affecting millions of individuals annually and generating substantial physical, psychological, social, and economic burdens. According to recent global cancer statistics, advances in early detection and treatment have significantly increased survival rates, resulting in a growing population of cancer survivors who must navigate complex long-term health and psychosocial consequences beyond the completion of medical treatment (Kolsteren et al., 2022; Tonorezos et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2023; Bergerot et al., 2024). While improvements in oncology care have extended life expectancy, survivorship is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional process characterized not only by physical recovery but also by continuous psychological adaptation. Consequently, understanding the psychological experiences of cancer survivors has

become a critical priority within health psychology and psycho-oncology research (Kagee , 2022; Conti et al., 2024; Namjoshi, 2024; Meoded et al., 2025).

Among the numerous challenges experienced during survivorship, stress represents one of the most pervasive and persistent concerns. Cancer-related stress extends far beyond the initial diagnosis and treatment period, often continuing throughout long-term survivorship. Survivors frequently report anxiety regarding disease recurrence, uncertainty about future health outcomes, disruptions to social and occupational functioning, financial strain, and difficulties reconstructing their personal identities after treatment (Maheu et al., 2021; Emery et al., 2022; Pawłowski et al., 2022). These stressors are particularly significant because they influence not only psychological well-being but also treatment adherence, health-related behaviors, immune functioning, and overall quality of life. Contemporary health psychology perspectives emphasize that stress should not be understood merely as a reaction to illness but as an ongoing cognitive and emotional appraisal process through which individuals interpret and respond to health-related threats (Fauver et al., 2024; Ghasemiet al., 2024; Reza et al., 2023).

Recent empirical studies demonstrate that cancer-related stress is multidimensional and dynamic. Emotional distress commonly manifests through anxiety, depressive symptoms, fear of recurrence, and uncertainty regarding prognosis (Ehrhardt et al., 2023; Manne et al., 2023). At the same time, survivors frequently encounter social challenges, including altered family relationships, social isolation, stigmatization, and reduced workplace participation (Chan et al., 2023; Zarei et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2025). Financial toxicity has also emerged as a significant survivorship concern, particularly among individuals facing prolonged treatment expenses and reduced earning capacity (Yabroff et al., 2022). Furthermore, accumulating evidence suggests that chronic psychological stress contributes to physiological dysregulation through neuroendocrine and immunological pathways, potentially influencing recovery trajectories and long-term health outcomes (Alotiby, 2024; Knezevic et al., 2023). These findings underscore the necessity of examining cancer survivorship through an integrated biopsychosocial framework that recognizes the interconnected nature of psychological, social, and biological processes.

Within this context, coping strategies play a crucial role in determining how survivors adapt to cancer-related stressors. Coping refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage demands that exceed available resources. Contemporary coping literature identifies three major dimensions particularly relevant to cancer survivorship: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and meaning-focused coping (Ahmadi et al., 2022; Park & Park, 2023; Dong et al., 2024). Problem-focused coping involves active attempts to address stressors through information seeking, treatment management, and lifestyle modification. Emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional responses through social support, mindfulness, relaxation, and emotional expression. Meaning-focused coping, meanwhile, emphasizes cognitive reappraisal, existential reflection, and the reconstruction of purpose following adversity. Recent psycho-oncology studies indicate that survivors often utilize multiple coping mechanisms simultaneously, suggesting that adaptation emerges from a dynamic interaction among different coping processes rather than reliance on a single strategy (Mirzaie et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2025).

The growing scholarly interest in resilience and post-traumatic growth has further expanded understanding of survivorship experiences. Emerging evidence suggests that some survivors report positive psychological transformations, including increased appreciation of life, stronger interpersonal relationships, enhanced spiritual awareness, and redefined personal priorities following cancer experiences (Casellas-Grau et al., 2021; Marziliano et al., 2020; Almeida et al., 2022). These

findings challenge traditional deficit-oriented perspectives that focus exclusively on distress and dysfunction. Instead, they highlight the importance of examining how individuals create meaning from illness experiences and transform adversity into opportunities for personal growth. Such perspectives align closely with contemporary health psychology theories emphasizing psychological flexibility, meaning-making, and adaptive resilience as central mechanisms of long-term adjustment (Antoni et al., 2023; Pawłowski et al., 2025).

Although significant progress has been made in the field of psycho-oncology research, there are still a number of important areas that have not been sufficiently addressed. First of all, many of the existing works are focused on quantitative methods, which are based on the measurement of pre-defined psychological constructs, for example with standard psychometric tools. Such methods offer important statistical information, but do not fully capture the subjective meaning, lived experience, and contextual factors influencing the perceptions of stress and coping on the part of survivors. Second, numerous studies focus on coping dimensions separately, which leads to pieces of the coping puzzle. Second, many studies look at specific coping dimensions individually, which results in partial coping understandings. Not much attention has been paid to the dynamic interactions between problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping strategies across the course of survivorship. Thirdly, most modern survivorship research focuses on clinical outcomes and symptom reduction, with a relatively small number of studies looking at the underlying psychological mechanisms of identity reconstruction, existential adaptation, and meaning-making. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the ways in which survivors experience, interpret and cope with cancer-related stress.

In addition, the coping processes are now known to be affected by cultural, social, and context. Traditional theories have been created under individualistic, Western paradigms, which may fail to account for culturally relevant understandings of illness and coping, or the importance of spiritual experiences, collective coping resources, and culturally embedded experiences of illness, across diverse populations (Park & Folkman, 2023; Chan et al., 2023). To provide deeper knowledge and culturally appropriate psychosocial interventions, therefore, a qualitative investigation that can be used to gain insight into survivors' lived experiences is required, which can generate more contextually grounded knowledge.

The present study aims to fill these gaps by using a phenomenological health psychology approach to investigate the lived experience of stress and coping amongst cancer survivors. The present research is different from past research, which largely used tests of coping components or quantitative symptom measures, in that all four coping components, emotional stress, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and meaning-focused coping, were analyzed in the context of psychological adaptation. The novelty of the study is that it combines the transactional stress theory, the meaning-focused coping theory and the lived experience of the survivors in a multi-dimensional framework that presents a picture of the simultaneous action of coping mechanisms that facilitate the process of psychological adjustment and building the resilience of survivors. Overall, this study helps to advance the health psychology literature and deepen theoretical understanding of coping processes in chronic illness and provides practical implications for designing comprehensive psychosocial cancer survivorship interventions that help promote long-term well-being and quality of life for cancer survivors.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of stress and coping among cancer survivors. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for investigating subjective experiences because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret, construct, and assign meaning to significant life events (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Yaden et al., 2024). Within the context of health psychology, a phenomenological approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of cancer survivorship that may not be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The study was guided by the transactional model of stress and coping and contemporary meaning-focused coping perspectives, which emphasize the subjective appraisal of stressors and adaptive responses to chronic health challenges.

### Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in metropolitan healthcare settings, including outpatient oncology clinics and cancer support communities that provide ongoing psychosocial support for cancer survivors. These settings were selected because they offer access to individuals who have experienced different stages of diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment adjustment.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit information-rich participants capable of providing detailed accounts of survivorship experiences (Dahal et al., 2024). Twenty-five adult cancer survivors participated in the study. To ensure diversity of perspectives, participants varied in age, gender, cancer type, survivorship duration, and socioeconomic background. Eligibility criteria required participants to have completed at least one phase of cancer treatment, be medically stable at the time of data collection, and voluntarily consent to participate in in-depth interviews. This heterogeneous sampling strategy enhanced the breadth of experiences represented in the dataset and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of stress and coping processes across survivorship contexts.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between January and April 2025. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it provides sufficient flexibility to explore individual experiences while maintaining consistency across participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either in private consultation rooms or secure meeting spaces within cancer support organizations.

The interview protocol focused on four principal domains: experiences of cancer-related stress, psychological and social challenges during survivorship, coping strategies employed to manage stress, and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of those coping mechanisms. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to provide detailed narratives, while probing questions were used to clarify meanings and deepen exploration of emerging issues. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of participants' narratives. To enhance contextual understanding and methodological triangulation, observational field notes were collected during support-group activities and participant interactions. These supplementary data provided additional insights into social dynamics and coping behaviors that complemented interview findings.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Hartono et al. (2025). This approach was selected because it allows systematic identification, interpretation, and reporting of patterns within qualitative datasets. Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to achieve data familiarization. Initial codes were subsequently generated and organized into meaningful categories. Related codes were then clustered into broader themes representing recurring patterns of stress experiences, coping mechanisms, and psychological adaptation.

Throughout the analytical process, constant comparison techniques were applied to identify similarities and differences across participants' narratives. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate data organization, coding management, and retrieval of thematic evidence. The final themes were reviewed and refined to ensure conceptual coherence and alignment with the study's theoretical framework.

## Trustworthiness and Research Rigor

Several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings based on Aslan (2025) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation involving interview transcripts, observational field notes, and theoretical literature. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify the accuracy of thematic representations.

Dependability was enhanced through peer debriefing with qualitative research and health psychology scholars who critically reviewed coding decisions and thematic development. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to document methodological decisions and minimize potential researcher bias. Furthermore, detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures were provided to facilitate transferability and ensure transparency of the research process. Collectively, these procedures contributed to the rigor, reliability, and authenticity of the study findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the phenomenological analysis of interviews conducted with 25 cancer survivors recruited from oncology outpatient clinics and community-based cancer support groups. The analysis sought to explore how survivors experienced stress throughout the survivorship process and how they employed coping strategies to adapt to the psychological, social, and existential challenges associated with cancer. Through iterative coding, categorization, and thematic development, four major themes emerged from the data: (1) Emotional Stress and Psychological Burden, (2) Problem-Focused Coping Strategies, (3) Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies, and (4) Meaning-Focused Coping and Psychological Growth.

The findings reveal that survivorship is not merely a period of medical recovery but a continuous process of psychological adaptation. Participants consistently described ongoing uncertainty, fear, and emotional vulnerability, while simultaneously developing coping mechanisms that enabled them to regain control, regulate emotional responses, and reconstruct personal meaning. The relationship among these themes is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Major Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Emotional Stress and Psychological Burden	Fear of recurrence, anxiety, depressive feelings, sleep disturbance, social isolation

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies	Treatment management, lifestyle adjustment, information seeking, support-group engagement
Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies	Mindfulness, emotional disclosure, relaxation practices, spirituality
Meaning-Focused Coping and Psychological Growth	Meaning reconstruction, gratitude, identity transformation, helping others

Source: Interview and observational data analyzed by the authors, 2025

As shown in Table 1, participants rarely relied on a single coping strategy. Instead, survivorship adaptation emerged through the interaction of behavioral, emotional, and meaning-oriented coping processes. The following sections elaborate each theme in detail.

### **Emotional Stress and Psychological Burden**

Emotional stress emerged as the most dominant theme across participant narratives. Although all participants had completed at least one stage of cancer treatment, psychological distress remained highly salient. Fear of recurrence, uncertainty regarding future health, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of social disconnection were repeatedly described as persistent challenges.

Many participants emphasized that the completion of treatment did not eliminate anxiety. Rather, survivorship introduced a new form of uncertainty characterized by the absence of continuous medical intervention and the realization that recurrence remained possible.

One participant explained:

*“People around me assumed that everything was over once my chemotherapy ended. In reality, that was when my anxiety became stronger. During treatment, I knew what was happening because doctors were constantly monitoring me. After treatment, I felt responsible for noticing every change in my body. Every headache, every unusual pain, and every moment of fatigue immediately made me think about cancer. Sometimes I know it is irrational, but the fear comes automatically. I feel like I am always watching for signs that something might be wrong.”*

This narrative demonstrates how survivorship is characterized by continuous threat appraisal. Participants frequently interpreted ordinary bodily sensations through the lens of previous illness experiences, creating ongoing vigilance and psychological strain.

A similar pattern appeared in another participant’s account, particularly concerning medical follow-up examinations:

*“Every hospital visit brings back memories that I would rather forget. Even before receiving test results, I start imagining the worst possible outcomes. I cannot sleep properly for several days before an appointment. My family tells me that everything will be fine, but they do not understand that uncertainty is exhausting. It feels like my life is divided between periods of waiting and worrying.”*

The data suggest that hospital environments functioned as emotional triggers that reactivated memories associated with diagnosis and treatment. Consequently, routine medical surveillance often became a source of stress rather than reassurance.

Beyond recurrence-related concerns, participants reported emotional difficulties associated with changes in identity and life circumstances.

One survivor reflected:

*“Before cancer, I was independent and active. After treatment, I felt like I had become a different person. My body changed, my energy changed, and even my confidence changed. Sometimes I look at myself and feel disconnected from the person I used to be. That loss affects me emotionally more than people realize.”*

This narrative illustrates how cancer survivorship extends beyond physical recovery and involves profound psychological adjustments. The findings indicate that emotional stress is shaped by both health-related uncertainty and the challenge of reconstructing personal identity following illness.

Field observations supported these findings. During support-group meetings, participants frequently discussed fears of recurrence, uncertainty about future health, and difficulties adjusting to post-treatment life. These concerns emerged regardless of age, gender, or cancer type, suggesting that emotional stress represents a common survivorship experience.

### **Problem-Focused Coping Strategies**

The second major theme concerns problem-focused coping strategies. Participants actively engaged in practical behaviors intended to reduce uncertainty and increase control over survivorship-related challenges. These strategies included treatment management, information seeking, lifestyle modification, and active participation in support networks.

A recurring pattern involved meticulous organization of medical routines and health-related activities.

One participant explained:

*“I keep detailed records of everything related to my health. I have folders for medical reports, reminders for appointments, and notes about symptoms. Being organized helps me feel less overwhelmed because I know exactly what needs to be done. Cancer taught me that preparation reduces fear. The more organized I am, the more confident I feel.”*

This account suggests that organizational behaviors functioned as psychological resources rather than merely practical tools. Participants frequently associated planning with increased confidence and reduced anxiety.

Information seeking also emerged as a central coping mechanism.

A participant stated:

*“When I was first diagnosed, I felt powerless because I did not understand what was happening. Learning about my condition changed that. I started asking questions, reading reliable sources, and attending educational sessions. Understanding my illness gave me a sense of control. I realized that knowledge could reduce uncertainty.”*

However, participants also recognized potential limitations of excessive information seeking.

Another survivor explained:

*“Sometimes searching for information online created more anxiety because I encountered negative stories and conflicting advice. Eventually, I learned that not all information is helpful. I became more selective about where I obtained information.”*

These findings indicate that information seeking functions as a coping resource when survivors perceive information as relevant, credible, and manageable. Lifestyle modification represented another important coping strategy.

One participant reflected:

*“Cancer changed the way I think about health. I exercise regularly now, eat more carefully, and pay attention to my sleep. These changes do not guarantee that I will never become sick again, but they make me feel that I am actively contributing to my well-being. That feeling alone reduces some of my anxiety.”*

Field observations further revealed that support-group meetings often involved discussions about nutrition, exercise, treatment side effects, and daily self-management practices. Participants exchanged practical advice and encouraged one another to maintain healthy behaviors. Collectively, these findings suggest that problem-focused coping helps survivors regain a sense of agency by addressing aspects of survivorship that remain within their control.

### **Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies**

The third theme reflects participants' efforts to regulate emotional responses associated with cancer-related stress. While problem-focused strategies targeted external challenges, emotion-focused coping addressed anxiety, fear, sadness, and emotional exhaustion.

Mindfulness practices emerged as one of the most frequently reported coping strategies.

One participant explained:

*“There are moments when my anxiety becomes overwhelming, especially before medical appointments. During those times, mindfulness helps me focus on the present instead of imagining future problems. I usually sit quietly, concentrate on my breathing, and remind myself that worrying cannot change the outcome. It helps me regain emotional balance.”*

This account illustrates how mindfulness functions as a mechanism for reducing cognitive rumination and emotional arousal.

Another participant emphasized the importance of emotional disclosure:

*“For a long time, I tried to appear strong because I did not want my family to worry. Eventually, I realized that keeping everything inside made my stress worse. Talking openly about my fears was incredibly helpful. Once I started sharing my experiences with other survivors, I felt less isolated and more understood.”*

The data indicate that emotional expression played an important role in reducing psychological burden. Participants frequently described conversations with peers as more emotionally validating than interactions with individuals who had not experienced cancer.

Support-group observations reinforced this finding. Participants regularly shared personal stories, discussed fears of recurrence, and provided emotional reassurance to one another. These interactions often generated visible emotional relief and strengthened interpersonal connections. Spirituality also emerged as a significant emotional coping resource.

One survivor explained:

*“There were times when I felt powerless and could not find answers to my questions. Prayer became a source of comfort because it allowed me to focus on*

*acceptance rather than fear. My faith did not remove uncertainty, but it gave me strength to live with it.”*

Another participant noted:

*“Spiritual practices helped me understand that not everything can be controlled. Learning to accept uncertainty reduced the emotional pressure I constantly placed on myself.”*

These narratives suggest that spirituality provided emotional reassurance and facilitated acceptance of circumstances beyond personal control. Overall, emotion-focused coping enabled participants to regulate distress, strengthen emotional resilience, and maintain psychological stability throughout survivorship.

### **Meaning-Focused Coping and Psychological Growth**

The fourth and final theme concerns meaning-focused coping and psychological growth. Participants frequently described cancer as a transformative experience that altered their values, priorities, and understanding of life.

One participant reflected:

*“Before cancer, I was constantly focused on work and achievement. Everything revolved around deadlines and responsibilities. The illness forced me to stop and reconsider what truly mattered. Now I value relationships, health, and personal well-being much more than professional success. Cancer changed my perspective in ways I never expected.”*

This narrative demonstrates a process of meaning reconstruction through which adversity becomes integrated into a broader life narrative.

A similar perspective emerged in another participant’s account:

*“Cancer made me realize that life is fragile. I used to postpone things that were important because I thought there would always be more time. After treatment, I became more intentional about how I spend my time and who I spend it with. In some ways, the experience helped me appreciate life more deeply.”*

The findings indicate that gratitude emerged as an important component of psychological adaptation. Participants frequently reported greater appreciation for everyday experiences, relationships, and personal well-being. Meaning-focused coping also involved helping others.

One participant explained:

*“I continue attending support groups because I want to support people who are beginning their cancer journey. When I see someone who is frightened and confused, I remember how I felt during diagnosis. Sharing my experience gives purpose to everything I went through. It allows me to transform something painful into something meaningful.”*

Another survivor similarly stated:

*“Helping others reminds me how far I have come. It turns my experience into a source of hope rather than a source of suffering.”*

Field observations confirmed that experienced survivors frequently acted as informal mentors within support groups. They provided emotional reassurance, practical advice, and encouragement to newly diagnosed members. These findings suggest that meaning-focused coping extends beyond adaptation and contributes to personal growth, resilience, and identity reconstruction. Through gratitude, reflection, spirituality, and helping others, participants transformed adversity into opportunities for psychological development.

## Integrated Model of Survivorship Adaptation

The findings indicate that survivorship adaptation is not governed by a single coping strategy. Instead, emotional stress triggers the simultaneous use of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping mechanisms. These interconnected processes contribute to resilience, psychological adjustment, and improved quality of life.

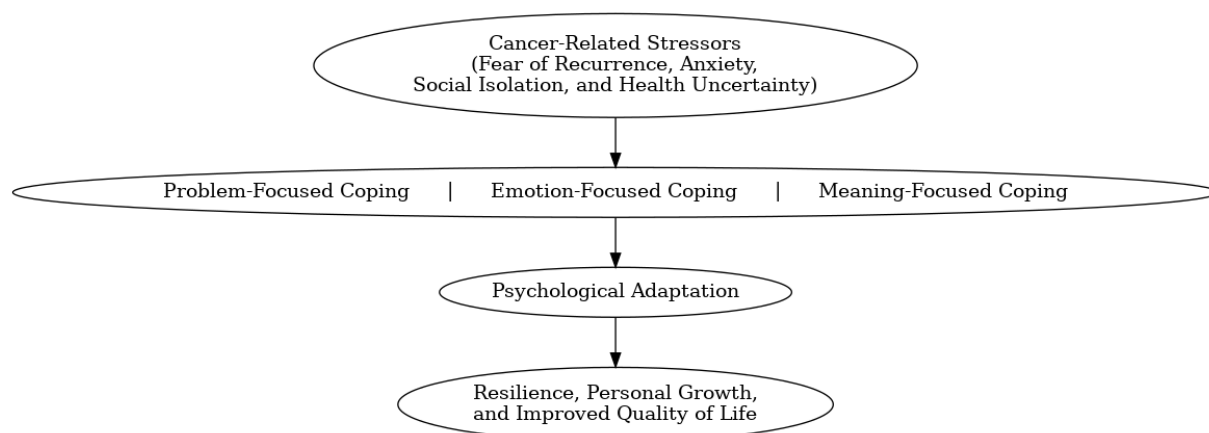


Figure 1. Integrated Model of Stress and Coping Among Cancer Survivors

Source: Developed from thematic analysis of interview and observational data, 2025

The model illustrates the multidimensional nature of survivorship adaptation and highlights the complementary functions of different coping strategies in supporting long-term psychological well-being.

### Multidimensional Coping as a Mechanism of Psychological Adaptation in Cancer Survivorship

The findings of this study demonstrate that cancer survivorship is characterized by a continuous process of psychological adaptation in which survivors actively negotiate emotional distress through interconnected coping mechanisms. Rather than representing a post-treatment phase free from psychological burden, survivorship emerged as an ongoing experience marked by uncertainty, fear of recurrence, identity disruption, and social-emotional challenges. These findings support recent psycho-oncology research indicating that emotional distress frequently persists long after treatment completion and remains one of the most significant determinants of survivors' quality of life (Doege et al., 2022; Lustberg et al., 2023; Ehrhardt et al., 2023). The prevalence of recurrence-related anxiety observed in this study is consistent with evidence suggesting that fear of cancer recurrence represents a chronic psychosocial concern that affects daily functioning, emotional well-being, and future planning among survivors (Maheu et al., 2021). However, this study extends previous quantitative findings by demonstrating how recurrence fears become embedded within everyday interpretations of bodily sensations, social interactions, and healthcare experiences.

The prominence of emotional stress among participants reinforces the relevance of Lazarus and Folkman's transactional perspective, which conceptualizes stress as an ongoing appraisal process rather than a reaction to isolated events. Recent studies have similarly reported that uncertainty regarding future health remains a central psychological challenge among cancer survivors (Chan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the present findings reveal that survivorship-related uncertainty is not solely medically driven but is also shaped by identity reconstruction and perceived emotional misunderstanding. This insight contributes to contemporary health

psychology literature by highlighting the relational and existential dimensions of cancer-related stress that are often overlooked in symptom-focused research.

The findings further demonstrate that problem-focused coping plays a critical role in restoring perceived control over survivorship experiences. Participants actively engaged in treatment management, information seeking, and lifestyle modification to reduce uncertainty and strengthen self-efficacy. These findings align with recent studies indicating that self-management behaviors enhance psychological adjustment and improve survivors' perceptions of competence and autonomy (Miller et al., 2024; Yabroff et al., 2022). However, the present study also reveals the dual nature of information-seeking behavior. While access to information increased confidence and facilitated informed decision-making, excessive exposure to health information occasionally intensified anxiety. This observation supports emerging evidence suggesting that information acquisition becomes adaptive only when survivors possess adequate health literacy and emotional resources to process complex medical information (Lebel et al., 2023). Consequently, survivorship interventions should emphasize not only information provision but also guidance regarding information evaluation and utilization.

Another important finding concerns the significance of emotion-focused coping strategies. Participants consistently described mindfulness practices, emotional disclosure, peer support, and spirituality as effective resources for managing psychological distress. These findings correspond with recent research demonstrating that mindfulness-based interventions reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation among cancer survivors (Zhu et al., 2023; Durosini et al., 2022). Similarly, studies conducted in psycho-oncology contexts have emphasized the protective role of emotional support and social connectedness in reducing loneliness and enhancing psychological well-being (Chan et al., 2023; Almeida et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this study contributes additional insight by illustrating how emotional validation from fellow survivors often possesses greater therapeutic value than general social support from family members. This suggests that shared experiential understanding constitutes a unique psychosocial resource within survivorship communities.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of meaning-focused coping as a higher-order adaptation mechanism. Participants frequently interpreted cancer as a transformative life experience that prompted gratitude, spiritual growth, and re-evaluation of personal priorities. These findings support recent evidence linking meaning-making processes with resilience, post-traumatic growth, and psychological well-being among cancer survivors (Nisyraiou et al., 2022; Aliche et al., 2023; Almeida et al., 2022). However, unlike previous studies that often conceptualize post-traumatic growth as an outcome occurring after distress has diminished, the present findings suggest that growth and distress coexist simultaneously. Survivors continued to experience fear and uncertainty while also reporting increased appreciation of life, stronger interpersonal relationships, and renewed life purpose. This observation contributes theoretically to contemporary health psychology by supporting a dialectical understanding of adaptation in which vulnerability and growth develop concurrently rather than sequentially.

The novelty of this study resides in its integration of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping within a single phenomenological framework of cancer survivorship. Existing research frequently examines these coping dimensions independently, resulting in fragmented explanations of adaptation processes. In contrast, the present findings demonstrate that survivorship adjustment emerges through the interaction of multiple coping systems operating simultaneously. Problem-focused coping addresses practical challenges, emotion-focused coping regulates psychological distress, and meaning-focused coping

facilitates identity reconstruction and existential adaptation. This multidimensional model offers a more comprehensive understanding of long-term survivorship than traditional single-domain coping approaches.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing integrated psychosocial interventions that extend beyond symptom management. Healthcare providers should incorporate psychological counseling, peer-support programs, mindfulness-based interventions, and meaning-centered therapeutic approaches into survivorship care plans. Such interventions may enhance survivors' capacity to manage uncertainty, strengthen resilience, and improve quality of life. Furthermore, the strong influence of spirituality and peer support identified in this study suggests that culturally responsive survivorship programs should recognize the importance of communal and existential resources in psychological adaptation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved participants recruited from metropolitan healthcare settings, which may limit transferability to survivors living in rural or underserved regions. Second, the phenomenological design emphasizes subjective experiences and therefore does not permit causal conclusions regarding the effectiveness of specific coping strategies. Third, participants represented diverse cancer types and survivorship stages, which may have influenced variations in stress experiences and coping responses.

Future research should investigate longitudinal changes in coping processes throughout different phases of survivorship and explore how demographic, cultural, and clinical factors influence adaptation trajectories. Comparative studies involving different cultural contexts may further clarify the role of spirituality, family dynamics, and community support in coping with cancer-related stress. Additionally, mixed-method and longitudinal designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between coping mechanisms, psychological resilience, and long-term quality-of-life outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cancer survivorship extends beyond physical recovery and involves a continuous process of psychological adaptation to stress, uncertainty, and identity transformation. The findings reveal that survivors experience persistent emotional challenges while simultaneously employing problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping strategies to maintain well-being. Theoretically, the study contributes to health psychology by proposing a multidimensional coping framework in which behavioral, emotional, and existential coping processes operate interactively to facilitate adaptation and resilience. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrating psychological counseling, peer-support initiatives, mindfulness-based interventions, and meaning-centered approaches into survivorship care programs.

The study is limited by its focus on participants recruited from metropolitan healthcare settings and its reliance on subjective experiences within a qualitative design. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to examine how coping processes evolve across survivorship stages and diverse sociocultural contexts. Overall, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of stress and coping among cancer survivors and offers valuable insights for improving psychosocial support and long-term quality of life.

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