

# Peer Support Groups: Leadership Development of Women Living with Breast Cancer in Russia

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# Breast Cancer in Developing Countries

Unique circumstances of women diagnosed with breast cancer in developing countries:

1. Diagnosis is more likely to occur in 3rd or 4th stage of disease due to **inadequate healthcare** infrastructure so treatment options far more limited.
2. Women are more likely to experience stigmas associated with breast cancer as the sexual connotations of the disease combine with cultural phobias about death to create deep-seated social **taboos**.

# Breast Cancer in Russia

- While overall cancer mortality rates in Russia have been falling since the early 1990s, deaths from female breast cancer have been increasing steadily at a time when they have been declining in several western countries (Hirte, 2007).
- 50,000 women are diagnosed yearly
- Only half are expected to survive more than five years.
- Breast cancer remains the leading cause of cancer mortality among women in Russia (Russian Oncology Center cited in Vartapetova, 2007)

# Peer Support Group: A Definition

- 10 to 20 women who are breast cancer survivors or patients who regularly meet for activities providing some psycho-social benefit.
- distinguished from other types of support by the fact it is lead by one or more of the survivors themselves, instead of by a trained psychologists.
- group leaders receive training to give them the skills to navigate the group dynamics and psychological needs of the members.
- peer support groups only have effects when women are derived of adequate support (Helgeson, Sheldon, Schulz, Yaslo 2002)

# Other Research

(Baker et al 1995, Carlsson and Hamsin, 1994, Michael et al 2001,  
Kornblith et al 2001)

- Social networks including horizontal support structures may lead to positive effects in particular the psychosocial adjustment of patients after they have been diagnosed.
- Life satisfaction rate among breast cancer survivors who volunteer in peer support programs is higher than regular breast cancer survivors and similar to that reported among the regular population in the areas of emotional well being, social functioning and vitality. There is less satisfaction with regards to sexual activity and body image.

# 5 Positive Effects of Peer Support Groups

1. easing social isolation
2. empowering women in their relationships with doctors
3. empowering women and to help other women relating to the issue of breast cancer
4. educating women about health and breast cancer
5. enhancing satisfaction with psychological well-being.

# Peer Support Leadership Has Even More Positive Effects

Women who have been members of the group for a longer period of time and who volunteer or lead in the framework of the group experience more positive effects than their peers who are newer and define themselves as participants.

# Concluding Question

What INTERVENTIONS move  
participants along a continuum  
from being

SERVICE RECIPIENT >

PEER SUPPORT PARTICIPANT >

PEER SUPPORT LEADER

? ? ?