

"Healthy people are of course not idle": The role of occupation and environment in perception of health and well-being in women with breast cancer

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Introduction: Breast cancer diagnosis generally causes a disruption to occupational life which may call for a change in occupational identity, performance, and routines. Occupational therapy with women with breast cancer is routinely concerned with educational programs, relaxation techniques and managing fatigue and limited attention has been paid to engagement in meaningful occupations.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the role of occupational participation and environmental resources in the perception of health and well-being of women with breast cancer.

Method: Using a qualitative approach, eighteen women were interviewed about their experiences of going through the phases of diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation for breast cancer. The main areas from the Occupational Performance History Interview were used as interview guidelines. A thematic analysis was performed on the data.

Results: Analysis revealed seven themes related to occupation and environment. The themes were labeled "maintaining control and stability", "experiencing a sense of self-worth", "enhancing self development", "information", "support and care", "refuge in community", and "rehabilitative opportunities". Occupational participation and environment were important factors contributing to subjective health and well-being throughout the breast cancer experience. In the context of illness, occupations took on changed meaning and were essential to regain control of life and a sense of competence and usefulness. Furthermore, through occupational participation the women were able to move towards a new arena of occupational identity and meaning. Information, emotional support, safety, and stimulating environments were crucial in alleviating distress and facilitate a satisfactory adaptation. **Conclusion:** The results support the idea that engagement in meaningful occupation in a safe and supportive environment has powerful restorative properties and contributes to a subjective experience of health. **Contribution to occupational therapy practice:** Occupational therapists need to widen their approach when working with women with breast cancer and focus on their needs as occupational beings. Furthermore, it is crucial that medical and nursing staff is educated about the role of occupational therapy in health care of women with breast cancer throughout the illness experience. Rehabilitative and supportive services ought to be based on a holistic perspective and emphasize the healthy aspects of the women's life.