

# Living with head and neck cancer: Coping strategies and post-traumatic growth among survivors.

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## *Objectives/purpose*

Diagnosis and treatment for head and neck cancer (HNC) can have significant and long-term adverse effects for patients. Despite this, quantitative research indicates that some HNC survivors have been shown to experience longer-term positive psychological changes, known as post-traumatic growth (PTG). Some survivorship studies have shown positive associations between PTG and health-related quality of life. Levels of growth appear lower in HNC than other cancers. This study aims to explore HNC survivors' use of coping strategies and whether this relates to PTG.

## *Methods*

We are conducting up to thirty interviews with survivors of HNC who have completed treatment and had time to reflect on their experiences. Thematic analysis is being undertaken to identify the range of coping strategies used and how these vary across survivors. Findings are being compared using scores on the brief Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI).

## *Results*

To date, 21 survivors have been interviewed. Preliminary findings suggest that PTG does exist in this population but that survivors differ in the extent of behavioural change they experience. A variety of coping styles were described, including putting oneself in the hands of professionals, facing fears, creating a new normal, discussion with loved ones, and protection of dependent family. How individuals cope with HNC varied depending on factors including gender, personal circumstances, severity of disease, level of engagement with self-management strategies, and knowledge about prognosis. The relationship between coping and PTG and is complex; both active and passive coping strategies were described by those with higher levels of PTG.

## *Conclusions and clinical implications*

Findings of this study will be used to develop a conceptual model of pathways to growth in HNC survivors. Our ultimate goal is to develop an evidence- and theory-based intervention to support and encourage PTG in this group, with the aim of improving health-related quality-of-life (QoL).