

Growth, Resilience and Purpose of Life Among Cancer Patients- A Case Study Perspective

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Abstract

Cancer is a life-altering illness that can also lead to positive psychological changes. This mixed-methods case study explored post-traumatic growth (PTG), resilience, and meaning in life among five women with breast cancer in South India. Standardized scales were used to assess PTG, meaning, and resilience, and narrative responses provided qualitative insight. Quantitative findings showed consistently high PTG and meaning scores, indicating enhanced appreciation of life, improved relationships, and strengthened life purpose. In contrast, resilience scores varied, suggesting that individuals may still experience vulnerability while simultaneously achieving psychological growth. Thematic analysis highlighted marital support, maternal roles, and spiritual beliefs as major contributors to coping and meaning-making. The study emphasizes the importance of interventions that support emotional recovery and promote positive transformation during survivorship.

Keywords: Post-traumatic growth, resilience, meaning in life, cancer

1. Introduction

Cancer is widely recognized as a major public health burden, affecting millions of individuals globally and posing profound physical, psychological, and social challenges throughout the disease trajectory (World Health Organization, 2022). Beyond its physiological effects, cancer creates uncertainty, fear of mortality, changes in identity, and disruptions in social functioning, which together make it a psychologically distressing experience (Stanton et al., 2015). However, contemporary research has increasingly documented that many patients also demonstrate significant positive psychological adaptation during and after cancer treatment (Casellas-Grau et al., 2017).

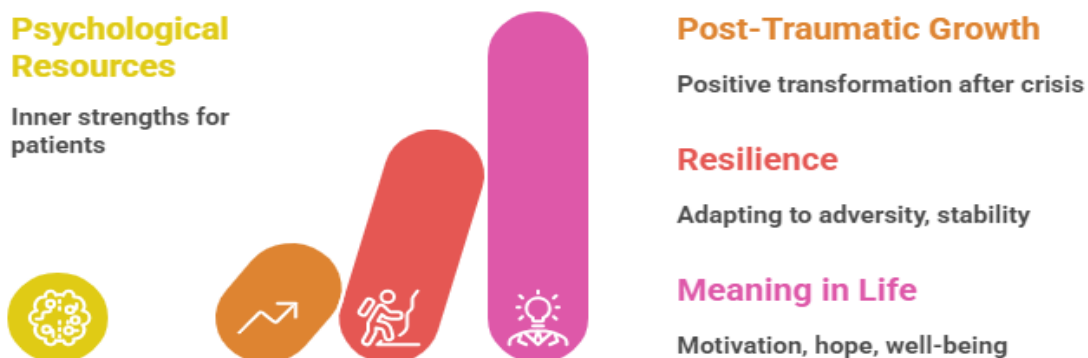
Positive Psychological Outcomes in Cancer

Positive psychology frameworks highlight that traumatic events can stimulate inner strength, new perspectives, and renewed personal meaning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). One such phenomenon is post-traumatic growth (PTG), referring to positive psychological transformation arising from a major life crisis (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Among cancer patients, PTG often manifests as

stronger interpersonal relationships, gratitude for life, recognition of inner capabilities, and pursuit of meaningful life goals (Costa & Pakenham, 2012).

Similarly, resilience is recognized as a key psychological resource that allows individuals to adapt to adversity, maintain emotional stability, and recover from stressors (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Higher emotional resilience predicts reduced treatment-related distress, better coping strategies, and improved quality of life among patients undergoing cancer treatment (Wu et al., 2020).

Psychological Resources Aid Cancer Patients



Another crucial aspect of psychological adjustment is meaning in life, which supports motivation, hope, and existential well-being in the face of illness (Park, 2016). Cancer patients who maintain a strong sense of purpose are more likely to derive constructive interpretations of the illness experience, facilitating psychological and spiritual growth (Lethborg et al., 2021).

Need for the Study

Despite extensive global research, Indian psycho-oncology literature still places limited focus on the growth-oriented psychological processes that may emerge after cancer diagnosis. Understanding these strengths is essential for designing culturally relevant psychosocial interventions and patient-centered survivorship care.

Objectives

This study aims to explore:

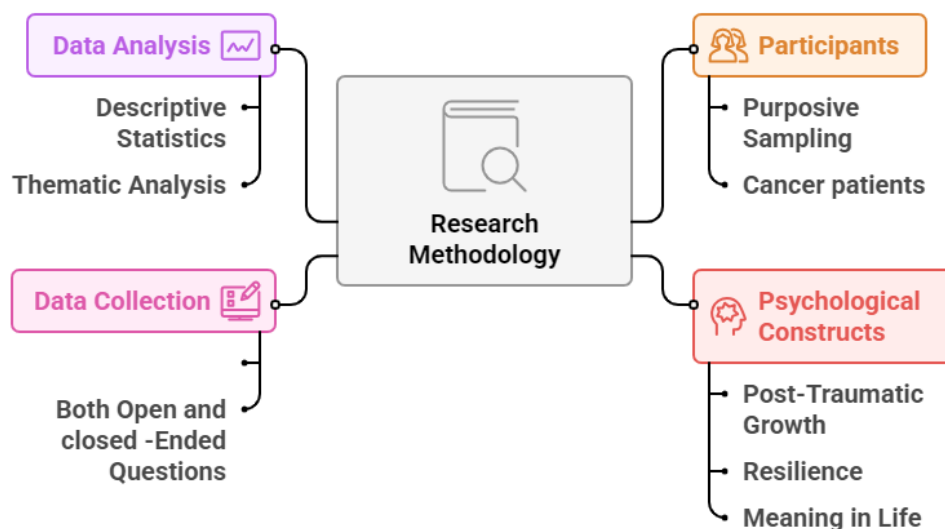
1. The levels of post-traumatic growth and meaning in life among cancer patients.
2. The role of resilience in psychological adaptation.
3. Individual illness experiences through detailed case studies.

This investigation is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Indian cancer patients cultivate resilience, discover meaning, and experience personal growth through their cancer journey.

2. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-method case study design to examine positive psychological responses among individuals diagnosed with cancer. The case study approach enables in-depth exploration of personal experiences and psychological adaptation in the context of chronic illness (Yin, 2018). A total of five subjects were recruited using purposive sampling from a cancer treatment setting in India. Eligibility criteria included confirmed cancer diagnosis, current or past treatment involvement, and ability to provide informed responses in English or Tamil. All five participants were women diagnosed with cancer, with ages ranging from 25 to 65 years.

Research Methodology for Cancer Patients' Psychological Responses



Three psychological constructs of post-traumatic growth (PTG), resilience, and meaning in life were assessed using standardized Likert-based questionnaires. PTG was measured using a short-form version based on the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), consisting of five core items scored from 0 to 4. Resilience was measured using a modified 5-item version of the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003), a well-validated tool widely used in clinical settings. Meaning in life was assessed through a 5-item scale derived from existential psychological frameworks in cancer literature (Park, 2016). Higher scores on each scale indicated stronger positive psychological functioning.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution and individual score comparison. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines to capture coping strategies, emotional strengths, and meaning-making processes. Ethical principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly followed throughout the study.

3. Results

3.1 Case Descriptions

Case 1: K

K is a 40-year-old female diagnosed with Stage II mouth cancer. She is married and currently works as a teacher. She identifies as having minimal religious or spiritual involvement. K is undergoing active treatment and reported experiencing multiple psychosocial challenges during illness.

K, a 40-year-old woman and mother, experienced significant emotional turmoil at the beginning of her cancer diagnosis. Over time, she began to recognize inner strengths she had not noticed before. Her child became her greatest source of motivation, shaping her hope and future aspirations. She expressed deeper gratitude for everyday life and noted stronger relationships within her family. Her coping was guided by a desire to stay alive and emotionally present for her child. These reflections demonstrate substantial post-traumatic growth, highlighting resilience and meaning centered around her maternal role.

Case 2: R

R is a 65-year-old female diagnosed with Stage I blood cancer. She is married and employed as a homemaker. She reports a strong spiritual belief system, which she relies upon for emotional coping. R continues to receive treatment and remains involved in family responsibilities despite her illness. R reported a major shift in her perspective on life following cancer treatment. She described herself as emotionally stronger and more capable of dealing with challenges. Her husband's support served as a powerful protective factor, helping her maintain optimism and motivation. She emphasized enjoying each moment and seeking happiness during her survivorship journey. R's adaptation demonstrates very high positive psychological growth, especially in emotional resilience and meaningful relationship enhancement.

Case 3: P

P is a 25-year-old unmarried female with Stage II colon cancer. She has no significant spiritual or religious affiliation. She works in the IT sector and is the youngest participant in the study, dealing with concerns related to career and future goals while undergoing cancer treatment.

P, the youngest participant, demonstrated strong psychological resilience and self-awareness throughout cancer treatment. She reflected on becoming more confident, able to handle distress, and motivated to find new purpose in life. Her future aspirations include contributing to social welfare, suggesting a desire to turn her experiences into support for others. Her coping involves hope-driven thinking and deriving meaning from personal strengths. She exemplifies high post-traumatic growth and existential purpose.

Case 4: PV

PV is a 49-year-old married female diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer. She works as a garment worker and reports moderate faith-based practices. She balances her treatment demands along with financial responsibilities and family expectations.

PV described that cancer enhanced her appreciation for life and made her more attentive to meaningful experiences. Although uncertainty and emotional setbacks occurred, she engaged in positive coping through acceptance and living in the present. She reported improved relational closeness and emotional strength. However, her sense of purpose fluctuated at times, reflecting an ongoing adjustment process. Nonetheless, PV maintained hope and active engagement in life responsibilities.

Case 5: RV

RV is a 52-year-old female diagnosed with Stage I breast cancer. She is married and employed as a saleswoman. She reports minimal religious involvement and relies primarily on family support in coping with her illness and treatment side effects.

RV highlighted that her child is the core of her emotional resilience. Ensuring her child's future happiness motivates her recovery and sustains her hope. She noted strengthened family relationships and increased gratitude following diagnosis. Though emotional challenges persist, she consciously works toward maintaining a positive mindset. Her narrative reflects strong resilience and meaning making through motherhood.

3.2 Quantitative Findings

Below are the quantitative results for the five case-study participants (initials only). Scores were computed from the questionnaire responses using the scoring rules described in the Methodology. PTG and Meaning/Purpose scores range 0–20; Resilience (modified CD-RISC) also ranges 0–20.

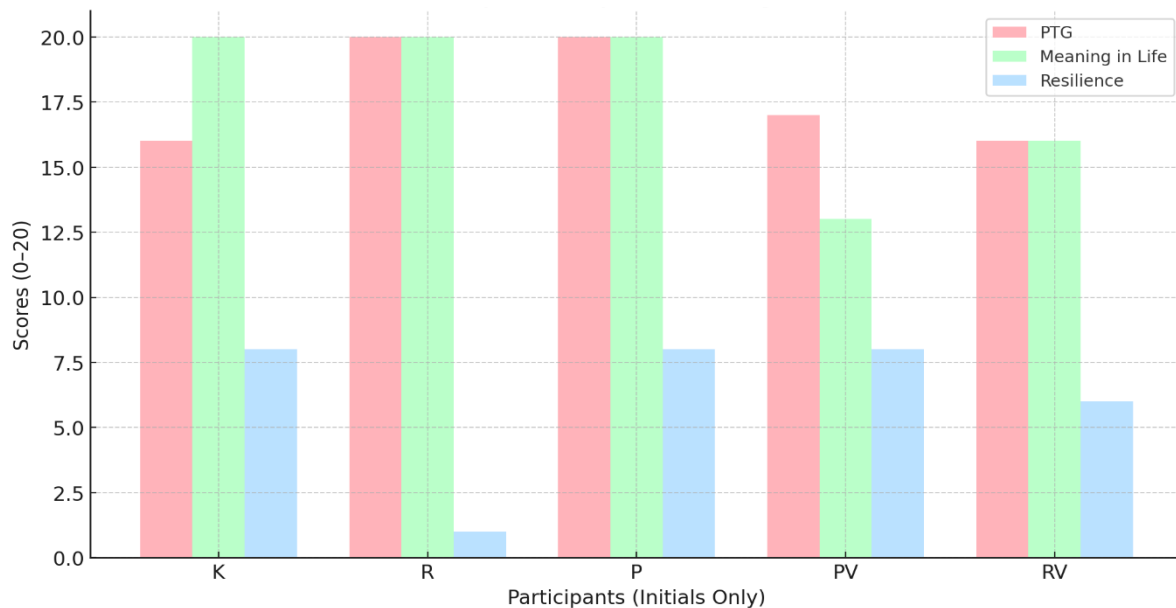
Table 2. Participant scores (N = 5)

Case No.	Initial	PTG (0–20)	Resilience (0–20)	Meaning (0–20)
1	K	16	8	20
2	R	20	1	20
3	P	20	8	20
4	PV	17	8	13
5	RV	16	6	16

Descriptive interpretation: PTG scores clustered at the high end (range 16–20, mean = 17.8), indicating substantial self-reported post-traumatic growth among participants. Meaning scores were similarly high for most participants (range 13–20, mean = 17.8), though one participant (PV) reported a comparatively lower sense of meaning. Resilience scores showed more variability (range 1–8, mean = 6.2), with one

participant (R) scoring notably low on the modified CD-RISC items; this suggests differences in moment-to-moment coping capacity despite uniformly high PTG and Meaning in some cases.

Figure 1. Post Traumatic Growth, Meaning in Life, and Resilience scores for each participant

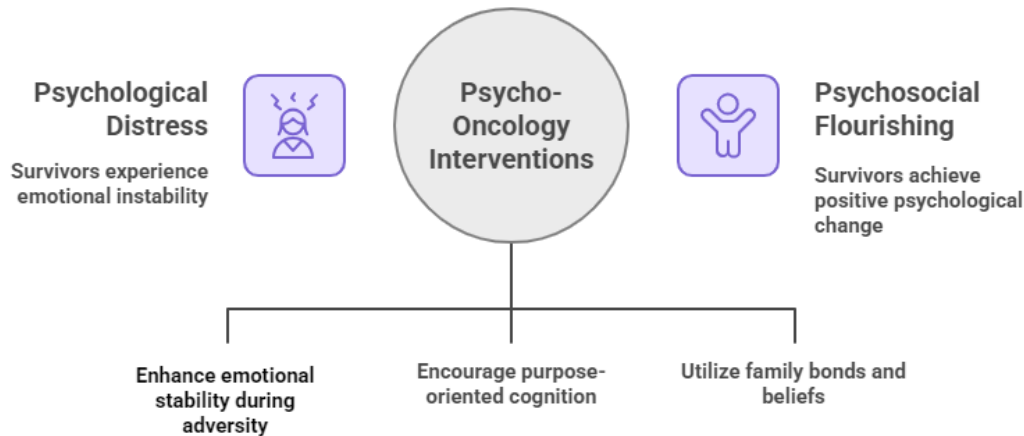


4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that breast cancer survivors often report substantial positive psychological change following diagnosis, particularly with respect to post-traumatic growth (PTG) and meaning in life. These results are consistent with the theoretical model proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), who stated that traumatic or life-threatening events can initiate cognitive and emotional restructuring that promotes improvement in personal strength, relationships and life priorities. The majority of participants in the present study described strengthened family relationships, renewed goals and appreciation for everyday life, which aligns with previous evidence demonstrating high PTG among women with breast cancer (Mystakidou et al., 2008).

Meaning in life also emerged as a strong adaptive factor. Research has shown that meaning making enables cancer patients to reinterpret their illness experience in a more positive and coherent manner, contributing to life satisfaction and emotional well-being (Lee et al., 2006). A meta-analysis by Li et al. (2022) found a significant positive association between meaning in life and PTG among cancer populations, supporting the pattern observed in this sample in which individuals scoring high in meaning also demonstrated higher growth. These findings suggest that purpose-oriented cognition may serve as a critical mechanism that transforms suffering into avenues for psychosocial flourishing.

Fostering Growth in Cancer Survivors



While PTG and meaning were consistently strong, resilience demonstrated notable variability. Resilience is defined as the capacity to maintain or restore emotional stability during adversity (Seiler & Jenewein, 2019). In this study, one participant presented high PTG but lower resilience, indicating that growth does not necessarily require robust coping strength in the present moment. This supports Tedeschi et al. (2018), who asserted that PTG is distinct from resilience; resilience emphasizes returning to baseline functioning, whereas PTG reflects surpassing previous levels of functioning through new perspectives. However, higher resilience has been shown to predict better quality of life and reduced distress among breast cancer survivors (Ristevska-Dimitrovska et al., 2015), emphasizing the value of interventions that build both resilience and meaning.

Cultural context should also be considered. In India, family bonds and spiritual beliefs often function as protective psychosocial resources (Pandey et al., 2016). This was evident among participants whose narratives reflected reliance on marital support and faith-based or existential hope. Thus, psycho-oncology care within such cultural settings may benefit from leveraging these relational and spiritual dimensions to foster meaning-centered adjustment.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this case-study analysis of five breast cancer patients demonstrates that post-traumatic growth and meaning in life are prominent positive psychological outcomes in survivorship. While resilience varied, the presence of strong meaning and growth suggests that even in challenging health contexts, individuals can reconstruct life narratives, strengthen relationships and cultivate purpose. These findings reinforce the value of holistic psycho-oncology that integrates growth, meaning, and resilience rather than focusing solely on distress. Future psychosocial care should incorporate meaning-centered and growth-facilitating strategies alongside traditional coping-enhancement frameworks.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is very small ($N = 5$), limiting generalizability and precluding inferential statistical testing. Second, the data relies on self-report measures which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Third, the resilience scale used was a modified form, not the full validated CD-RISC, potentially affecting measurement precision. Fourth, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and does not track change over time. Finally, the sample comprised only breast cancer patients within one cultural region, limiting applicability to other cancer types or cultural contexts. Despite these limitations, the detailed case narratives and scores offer valuable insight into positive psychological adaptation in the Indian cancer context.

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