

# BREAST CANCER AND WELL-BEING: PSYCHOSOCIAL EXPERIENCES AT AN ENVIRONMENTAL RETREAT

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## **Summary**

This research project sought to explore women's experiences of breast cancer and well-being at the Otis Foundation environmental retreat. The study was collaboration between the Otis Foundation and Dr Jan Pascal, School of Social Work and Social Policy, La Trobe University. The study was funded by the Department of Human Services, Victoria. All research procedures were fully approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee, project number HEC06-123.

Existing multidisciplinary literature indicated that a diagnosis of cancer has broad psychosocial impacts. Mental health is affected: at the very least, cancer creates overwhelming feelings of distress and anxiety, particularly at diagnosis of primary or metastatic disease. At its most profound (but less frequently), longer-term depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder may co-exist with the cancer experience. Beyond the individual's response, cancer has implications for the social and family contexts. Parenting, employment, and family and personal relationships all are affected. The literature points to established psychological and sociological interventions, such as stress management, cognitive restructuring and support groups, as ways to alleviate the ongoing distress of cancer experiences.

Beyond these psychosocial responses, the literature suggests that cancer is a crisis of meaning-making; an existential challenge to one's self-identity. Often, in light of a cancer diagnosis, one's past, present and future are revised. For some, cancer can enhance self-awareness and self-identity. Nonetheless, there is agreement in the literature that cancer is a distressing and challenging life experience, with the potential to diminish one's sense of self.

The present study sought to extend the traditional definitions of "psychosocial" to include the concepts of therapeutic landscapes. As a body of literature, therapeutic landscape research demonstrates links between health, and natural and built environments. Both physical and emotional well-being are enhanced through even minimal participation with natural environments (for instance, by looking upon a tranquil view).

Furthermore, relational, spiritual and symbolic benefits have been demonstrated in the research. These include, for example, confidence, creativity, stronger social connections and feeling empowered. Thus, physical “space”, as well as emotional attachments to “place”, combines to enhance psychosocial well-being.

The concepts of space and place were considered particularly important for a study of psychosocial experiences at an environmental retreat. This innovative approach underpinned the conceptual design of the study. In addition, the research focussed on the lived experiences of guests of the Otis Foundation. That is to say, the study wanted to explore the experiences of a visit to Otis from the guests’ personal point of view. To capture personal lived experience, the study employed a qualitative methodology, entailing strategies which elicited feelings, perceptions, thoughts and meanings. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants. All interviews were guided by the participants’ unique stories, and aimed to capture detail not possible in surveys or questionnaires. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Data was treated with stringent confidentiality and stored according to strict ethical guidelines.

Key findings to emerge from the study included the importance of space in terms of both the built and natural environments. Animals, trees, views, architecture, and the consideration of interior design and detail, were all important for participants’ well-being. The beauty and thoughtfulness of the environment translated into feelings of being cared for. Furthermore, the geographic location was seen as providing a peaceful space for rest, recovery and reconnection as the retreat set within a rural context.

The spaces within Otis were not merely physical. Of particular importance was the significance of “place”. Place was experienced as the meanings and attachments within the environment, encompassing, for example, the story of Otis and feelings of empathy and affiliation with Judy Burley and her family. Appreciation for the “gift” of Otis was also significant. This was experienced not only as a financial gift, but as the gift of feeling respected, non-stigmatised and cared for by the broader community.

Furthermore, Otis provided a place to reconnect with family, partners, friends and children. It was through feeling cared for by friends, family and the broader community that self-identity and well-being were enhanced. This combination of space and place served to augment psychosocial well-being by providing an opportunity for ontological insight and personal and community connections. As a result, the Otis Foundation retreat was perceived as a healing—or therapeutic—landscape.

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Dr Jan Pascal

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