

# African American Women Coping With Breast Cancer: A Qualitative Analysis

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To determine how African American women cope with breast cancer.

**Design:** Descriptive and exploratory study.

**Sample/Setting:** 66 African American women diagnosed with breast cancer were interviewed in the southeastern United States.

**Methods:** Data were collected through tape-recorded interviews using a semistructured interview guide. Data were analyzed by content analysis and frequency distributions.

**Main Research Variables:** Coping strategies used by women to adapt to a diagnosis of breast cancer.

**Findings:** Coping strategies described by African American women included relying on prayer, avoiding negative people, developing a positive attitude, having a will to live, and receiving support from family, friends, and support groups.

**Conclusion:** Spirituality played a major role in these African American women coping with breast cancer. Supportive networks also served as a vital asset throughout the breast cancer experience. Participants discussed the need for culturally sensitive breast cancer support groups.

**Implications for Nursing:** Nurses must recognize coping strategies that African American women with breast cancer use. Healthcare professionals need to develop culturally sensitive breast cancer support groups. Throughout the breast cancer experience, nurses must assess communication patterns among African American families. Nurses should serve as healthcare advocates for African American women with breast cancer.

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ Coping strategies can play a vital role in how African American women adapt to their diagnosis of breast cancer.
- ▶ Nurses should seek to understand the significance of social support and spirituality on coping behaviors among African American women with breast cancer.
- ▶ Nurses must develop culturally sensitive interventions that will assist African American women and their family members in coping with breast cancer.
- ▶ Future research studies are needed to determine what are effective and ineffective coping strategies for African American women with breast cancer.

women were found to express their emotions, practice problem solving, and use escapism to cope with breast cancer. Findings demonstrated that women who did not express their emotions or receive emotional support were more likely to have poorer survival from breast cancer than women who expressed their emotions and received emotional support.

## Literature Review

### Definitions of Coping

The term “coping” has been interchanged with words such as adaptation, mastery, resiliency, management, and adjustment (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991; Garland & Bush, 1982; Roy & Andrews, 1999). The concept of coping has been linked closely with stress, in that coping involves a process by which a person attempts to restore equilibrium in response to a stressful life event (Compas, Connor, Osowiecki, & Welch, 1997; Lazarus, 1993; Monat & Lazarus, 1991). *Mosby’s*

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**B**reast cancer reportedly is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women. African American women have a lower incidence of breast cancer; however, they have a higher mortality rate when compared to Caucasian women. Recent data have indicated that the five-year survival rate for breast cancer among African American women is 73% compared to 88% among Caucasian women (American Cancer Society, 2003).

Coping with breast cancer has been described as emotionally and physically challenging for women and their family members (Hilton, 1996; Hilton, Crawford, & Tarko, 2000; Morse & Fife, 1998; Radina & Armer, 2001; Yates, 1999). Coping strategies have been associated with adjustment to breast cancer (Brady & Helgeson, 1999; Osowiecki & Compas, 1999; Stanton et al., 2000). Reynolds et al. (2000) examined the relationship between coping strategies and survival in African American and Caucasian women with breast cancer. The researchers emphasized that the primary focus of the study was not to explain survival disparities between African American and Caucasian women with breast cancer but to evaluate styles of coping and breast cancer survival. Data indicated that African American women suppressed their emotions, used wishful thinking, and practiced positive reappraisal strategies to cope with breast cancer. Caucasian