Impact of Cancer Diagnosis on Self-Esteem and Identity Among Patients in Mumbai

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Abstract

Background: Cancer diagnosis is a profoundly stressful life event that affects not only physical health but also psychological well-being. Changes in self-esteem and personal identity are common among cancer patients due to factors such as disease severity, treatment-related physical changes, social stigma, and uncertainty about the future. In India, particularly in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, psychosocial aspects of cancer care are often underemphasized despite the growing cancer burden. Understanding the impact of cancer diagnosis on self-esteem and identity is essential for developing holistic, patient-centered oncology care.

Objectives: The present study aimed to assess the level of self-esteem and identity disturbance among cancer patients attending selected cancer hospitals in Mumbai, Maharashtra. It also sought to examine the association between self-esteem and selected demographic and clinical variables, and to compare mean self-esteem and identity scores across different patient groups.

Methods: A quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive and analytical research design was adopted. The study was conducted among 60 adult cancer patients selected using purposive sampling from selected tertiary cancer hospitals in Mumbai. Data were collected using a structured demographic and clinical data sheet, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and an adapted Identity Disturbance Questionnaire. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic variables and psychological scores. Inferential statistics, including Chi-square test and independent t-test, were applied to examine associations and differences between variables. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results: The findings revealed that 60% of the participants had low self-esteem, with a mean self-esteem score of 14.2 ± 4.5. The mean identity disturbance score was 27.8 ± 6.2, indicating moderate identity disturbance among the patients. A statistically significant association was found between cancer stage and self-esteem levels ($\chi^2 = 6.22$, p = 0.013), with patients in advanced stages reporting lower self-esteem. A significant difference in mean self-esteem scores was observed between younger and older patients (t = 2.24, p = 0.028), with older patients showing poorer self-esteem. No statistically significant association was found between gender and self-esteem, nor was there a significant difference in identity disturbance based on duration since diagnosis.

Conclusion: The study concludes that cancer diagnosis has a significant negative impact on self-esteem and personal identity among patients in Mumbai, particularly among older individuals and those with advanced-stage cancer. Identity disturbance appears to be a persistent concern regardless of time since diagnosis. These findings underscore the urgent need to integrate psychosocial assessment, counseling, and supportive interventions into routine cancer care to enhance psychological well-being and overall quality of life among cancer patients.

Article:

Introduction: Cancer is a chronic and often stigmatized illness that profoundly disrupts an individual's sense of self. Beyond physical symptoms, patients experience emotional distress, altered body image, loss of social roles, and existential uncertainty. Self-esteem, defined as one's overall evaluation of self-worth, and identity, which encompasses continuity of self-concept, are particularly vulnerable following cancer diagnosis.

In India, especially in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, patients face additional stressors such as financial burden, long treatment durations, and social stigma. Despite advances in medical care, psychosocial aspects of cancer remain under-addressed in routine clinical practice. This study aims to explore how cancer diagnosis affects self-esteem and identity among patients in selected cancer hospitals in Mumbai.

Aims of the Study

To assess the level of self-esteem among cancer patients in selected cancer hospitals in Mumbai.

To evaluate the extent of identity disturbance following cancer diagnosis.

To examine the association between self-esteem and selected demographic and clinical variables.

To compare mean self-esteem and identity scores across selected patient groups.

Hypotheses

H_1: There is a significant association between cancer stage and self-esteem levels.

H_2: There is a significant difference in mean self-esteem scores between younger and older cancer patients.

H_3: There is a significant association between gender and self-esteem levels.

H_4: There is a significant difference in identity disturbance scores based on duration since diagnosis.

Review of Literature:

Cancer diagnosis has profound psychosocial implications, particularly affecting patients' self-esteem and personal identity. Numerous national and international studies have examined psychological distress, self-concept, and identity changes among cancer patients. The following review summarizes key studies relevant to the present research.

Hopwood and Maguire conducted a descriptive study in 2001 in the United Kingdom to examine body image concerns and their impact on self-esteem among cancer patients. The study included patients undergoing treatment for breast and head-and-neck cancers. Standardized psychological scales were used to assess self-esteem and body image disturbances. The findings revealed that visible physical changes due to cancer treatment significantly lowered self-esteem and disrupted patients' sense of identity. The authors emphasized the need for psychological interventions focusing on body image and self-concept.[1]

In 2004, Kissane and colleagues carried out a cross-sectional study in Australia among women diagnosed with early- and advanced-stage breast cancer. The study aimed to assess psychological morbidity and quality of life. Results indicated that patients with advanced-stage cancer experienced greater identity disturbance, existential distress, and reduced self-esteem compared to those in early stages. The study highlighted the role of disease severity in shaping psychological outcomes.[2]

Pandey et al. conducted a hospital-based study in 2006 at a tertiary care center in Chandigarh, India. The study assessed anxiety, depression, and self-esteem among cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. Using standardized psychological tools, the researchers found that a majority of patients reported moderate to severe emotional distress, with significantly reduced self-esteem. Socioeconomic factors and lack of psychosocial support were identified as major contributors to psychological morbidity.[3]

Faller and colleagues performed a meta-analysis in 2013 across multiple European countries, including Germany, to evaluate the effectiveness of psycho-oncological interventions. The analysis included randomized controlled trials involving adult cancer patients. The study concluded that psychosocial distress, including low self-esteem and identity disruption, is highly prevalent among cancer patients. Interventions targeting emotional support and self-worth significantly improved psychological outcomes and quality of life.[4]

Carpentier and Fortenberry conducted a qualitative and quantitative study in 2010 in the United States among adolescent and young adult cancer survivors. The study explored the impact of cancer on identity formation, relationships, and self-esteem. Findings indicated that cancer caused a major disruption in identity development, particularly related to social roles, sexuality, and future aspirations. Persistent identity confusion was observed even after completion of treatment.[5]

Arora and colleagues conducted a multicenter study in 2018 across various oncology centers in the United States. The study focused on the role of social support in enhancing self-esteem and psychological adjustment among newly diagnosed cancer patients. Results demonstrated that patients receiving strong emotional and informational support from healthcare providers and family members reported better self-esteem and less identity disruption.[6]

Mishra et al. conducted a cross-sectional study in 2020 in an urban tertiary hospital in India to assess psychological morbidity among cancer patients. The study found a high prevalence of psychosocial problems, including low self-esteem and altered self-identity. Despite the availability of medical treatment, psychological needs were often neglected. The authors stressed the importance of integrating mental health services into oncology care in India.[7]

Research Methodology:

Research Design: A pre-experimental, one-group pre-test post-test design was adopted to assess the effectiveness of a structured educational intervention on caregiver knowledge regarding Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP) screening in preterm babies. This design allows comparison of knowledge levels before and after the intervention within the same group.

Research Approach: A **quantitative research approach** was adopted for the present study to objectively assess the impact of cancer diagnosis on self-esteem and identity among cancer patients.

Study Setting: The study was conducted in **selected tertiary cancer hospitals in Mumbai, Maharashtra**, including outpatient and inpatient oncology departments. in 2025.

Study Population: The target population consisted of **adult cancer patients receiving treatment** in selected cancer hospitals in Mumbai.

Sample Size: A total of 60 caregiversancer patients were selected for the study.

Sampling Technique: A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:
- Patient ages 18 years and above
- Diagnosed with any type of cancer
- Aware of their diagnosis
- Willing to participate
- Able to understand and respond to the questionnaire

Exclusion Criteria:

Caregivers who:
- Critically ill patients
- Patients with diagnosed severe psychiatric disorders
- Patients unwilling to participate

Variables of the Study

Independent variables: Age, gender, type of cancer, stage of cancer, duration since diagnosis

Dependent variables: Self-esteem and identity disturbance

Tools for Data Collection

1. Demographic and Clinical Data Sheet

Included age, gender, marital status, education, type of cancer, stage of cancer, and duration since diagnosis.

2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)
- 10-item standardized scale
- Measures global self-worth
- Scores range from 0–30
- Lower scores indicate lower self-esteem

3. Identity Disturbance Questionnaire (Adapted)
- Measures disruption in personal identity related to illness
- Higher scores indicate greater identity disturbance

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using **SPSS software**.

Descriptive statistics: frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation

Inferential statistics:
- **Chi-square test** to assess association between categorical variables
- **Independent t-test** to compare mean scores
- **Level of significance:** $p < 0.05$

RESULTS

Section I: Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Age Distribution
- 18–40 years: 20 patients (33.3%)
- 41–60 years: 28 patients (46.7%)
- Above 60 years: 12 patients (20%)

Gender
- Male: 32 (53.3%)
- Female: 28 (46.7%)

Type of Cancer
- Breast cancer: 18 (30%)
- Oral cancer: 12 (20%)
- Lung cancer: 8 (13.3%)
- Gastrointestinal cancer: 10 (16.7%)
- Others: 12 (20%)

Stage of Cancer
- Stage I–II: 24 (40%)
- Stage III–IV: 36 (60%)

Duration Since Diagnosis
- Less than 6 months: 22 (36.7%)
- More than 6 months: 38 (63.3%)

Section II: Levels of Self-Esteem and Identity Disturbance

Self-Esteem Levels
- Low self-esteem: 36 patients (60%)
- High self-esteem: 24 patients (40%)

Mean self-esteem score: 14.2 ± 4.5

Identity Disturbance:

Mean identity disturbance score:

27.8 ± 6.2

This indicates **moderate identity disturbance** among the majority of patients.

Section III: Association between Self-Esteem and Selected Variables (Chi-Square Test)

Cancer Stage and Self-Esteem

A statistically significant association was found:
- $\chi^2 = 6.22$
- $p = 0.013*$

Interpretation:
Patients in advanced stages (III–IV) were significantly more likely to experience low self-esteem compared to those in early stages.

Gender and Self-Esteem

◆ $\chi^2 = 3.60$
◆ $p = 0.058$

Interpretation:
Although males showed slightly lower self-esteem than females, the association was **not statistically significant**.
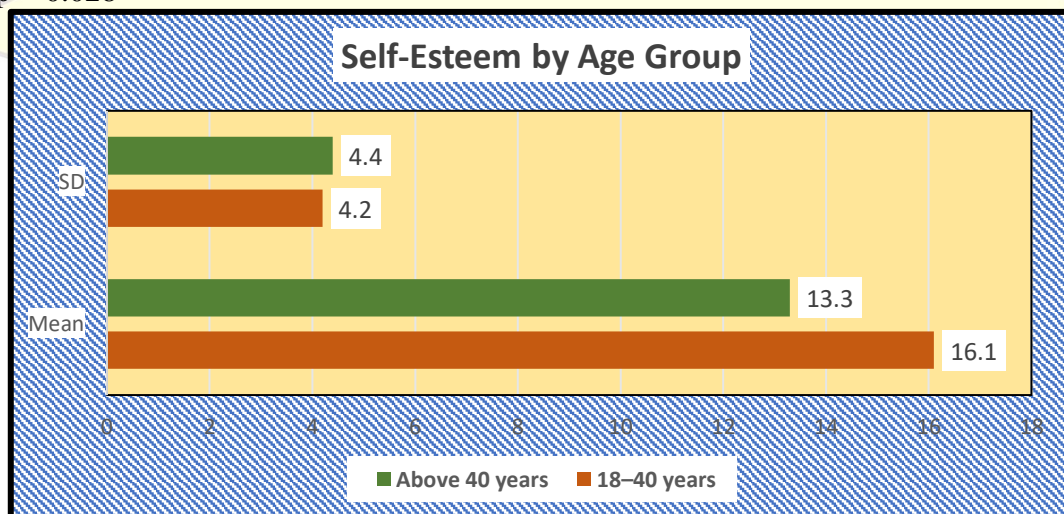
Section IV: Comparison of Mean Scores (Independent t-Test)

Self-Esteem by Age Group

Age Group	Mean	SD
18–40 years	16.1	4.2
Above 40 years	13.3	4.4

➢ $t = 2.24$
➢ $p = 0.028^*$

Interpretation:
Younger patients had significantly higher self-esteem than older patients.

Identity Disturbance by Duration Since Diagnosis

Duration	Mean	SD
< 6 months	29.3	5.9
≥ 6 months	26.9	6.3

Interpretation:
No statistically significant difference was found, suggesting that identity disturbance persists regardless of time since diagnosis.

Summary of Results
● Majority of patients experienced **low self-esteem**
● Advanced cancer stage significantly affected self-esteem
● Older patients showed poorer self-esteem
● Identity disturbance was prevalent across all groups
● Gender and duration since diagnosis were not significant predictors

Conclusion of Results
The findings clearly demonstrate that cancer diagnosis has a substantial negative impact on self-esteem and identity, especially among older patients and those with advanced disease.

These results reinforce the importance of psychosocial interventions in oncology settings.

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