

# An Exploration of Therapists' Experiences of Working with Adolescent Childhood Cancer Survivors

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## Why this Research topic?

In Ireland, an average of 328 children, adolescents and young adults are diagnosed with cancer every year (Childhood Cancer Ireland, 2022). In the last 40 years, the five-year survival rate for childhood cancer has improved from approximately 10% to approximately 80% (National Children's Research Centre, 2022).

In cancer research, adolescent patients are grouped with children and adults, using the term CAYAS (Child, Adolescent and Young Adults). In clinical practice, however, I noticed the very different challenges that a teenager with cancer was bringing when compared to those of a child or adult. The age-specific challenges and developmental tasks of adolescence must still be faced by an adolescent with a cancer diagnosis, in addition to the stress that cancer brings to their lives.

## Aims & Objectives

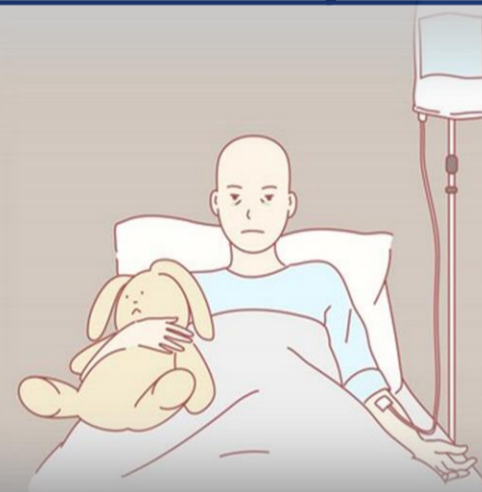
1. To identify therapists' understanding of how childhood cancer can impact an adolescent's psychological well-being.
2. To examine the impact of childhood cancer on normative development for an adolescent and the key consequences of the disease for their physical, social and psychological development.
3. To investigate treatment approaches used by participants and their experience of what works well in therapy for these adolescents.

## Methodology

- Ethical approval for this qualitative study was sought and received from IICP Ethics Committee.
- Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants, and they were recruited through contacts in IACP and cancer support organisations. Four participants were selected.
- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with each participant
- Thematic Analysis was chosen to interpret the data – this is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase coding framework for Thematic Analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in the data.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Physical Consequences



Scarring  
Hair Loss  
Fatigue/Weakness  
Physical Limitations  
PICC Line / Feeding Tube

Shame  
Self-Consciousness  
Negative Body Image

Experience of Bullying →

"...it was quite difficult for her to actually meet her friends. And then, the depression set in, and this feeling of self-worth was gone. She didn't nearly want her friends around because well why would they want to be hanging out with a sick person?" (Jayne)



"...the uncertainty, not knowing, not being able to trust that her body will tell her it's back because it has let her down so badly before." (Kate)

### Theme 2: Psychological Consequences

- Anxiety
- Living with Uncertainty and Fear
- Guilt and Masking: The 'Brave Face'
- Resilience

"...quite often they're very, very scared." (Jayne)

### Theme 3: Developmental Effects

- **Identity Development:** the 'before' and the 'after'.
- **Social Development:** the impact of separation and isolation from friends, school, community.
- **Developing Independence and Autonomy:** dependence on parents.

### Theme 4: The Voice of the Adolescent

"They don't want to be left in the dark. They're intelligent. They're clever. They know something's wrong... they want their voices to be heard as well, you know, the doctors who talk to the parents, they're trying to do the best for the client... But the teenager needs a voice too." (Jayne)

### Theme 5: Therapy Factors

Therapeutic distance through the use of creative media, including art, clay, nature therapy.

## Discussion

The research shows that therapists working with adolescent cancer survivors recognise significant consequences of the disease for their development and wellbeing. The adolescents' guilt, masking, and resilience are important and interconnected discussion points. This study contributes to our understanding of the adolescent survivor's felt need to put on a brave face to protect their loved ones, the impact of which warrants our attention. Their bravery is celebrated and commended across society, and we must do more to understand what this is like for an adolescent with cancer.

The adolescent's voice is often neglected throughout their cancer experience. Therapists understand that they feel like they are often overlooked and excluded from conversations and decisions. A difficult ethical dilemma exists around the potential disparity between the adolescent's wishes and those of their parents when deciding on treatments or on continuing with treatments. Therapy provides opportunity for the adolescent to explore and express their wishes.

Further research is needed that focuses on adolescent cancer survivors in isolation from young adults and children. Longitudinal research would be invaluable in examining the effects of trauma, dissociation, feeling unable to express fear, on the longer-term psychological wellbeing of these adolescents.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage bringing its own challenges and more research is needed to understand the true lived experience of adolescent cancer survivors.

Psychotherapy using creative media is an essential component of a treatment plan for their psychological wellbeing.

We must examine the popular narrative around bravery and resilience that exists for these young people and ask ourselves for whose benefit exists? Is this picture that is so frequently portrayed by the media an accurate depiction of how they truly feel, or how they believe they must act?



## References

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