

The Types and Sources of Meaningful Messages about Breast Cancer

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Background

Meaningful message research examines interpersonal messages "...remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon (1981, p. 27). Meaningful messages were further studied by Smith and Ellis (2001; 2004; Smith Ellis, & Yoo, 2001), who showed that they are guides to action.

Objective

Meaningful messages can aid breast cancer innovative outreach efforts by informing researchers about the types and sources of messages women are recalling that may lead them to, or deter them from, action.

Methods

In this study, N=137 women were recruited to take an online survey regarding meaningful messages they recalled about breast cancer. A total of N=77 women recalled such a message, described it, and identified its source.

Results

Four categories and 16 subcategories of message types emerged: (1) breast cancer awareness (statistics/facts, breast cancer affects us all, campaigns/organizations), (2) prevention (health/be proactive, improve/change a health behavior, family risk), (3) detection (breast self exam, mammograms, breast self exam and mammograms, early detection), and (4) treatment (appearance, choices, survival choices, social support, womanhood, fear/pain/negative, appreciation for everyday life). The analysis shows that 39% recalled a detection message, followed by 30% for treatment, 29% for awareness, and 2% for prevention.

Four categories of sources emerged accounting for 94% of all sources reported. These sources are family members, media, doctors/health care professionals, and friends. Media constituted the most reported source across all four categories of meaningful messages (30%), followed by family members (25%), friends (22%), and doctors (17%).

The majority of participants who had an awareness message (22 total) reported its source as the media (11), followed by friend (4), family member (3), doctor/health care professional (3), and other (1). Two participants' messages were about prevention, one each from a family member and the media. In the detection category, (30 total) family members (9) were reported most often, closely followed by doctors/health care professionals (8), media (6), friends (5), and other (2). Treatment meaningful messages (23 total) came mostly from friends (8), then family members (6), media (5), doctor/health care professionals (2), and other (2).

Conclusions

Respondents recalled few messages about breast cancer prevention, but they did recall messages about detection. This research demonstrates the power of the media, as well as the possibility that messages from family and friends are more likely to impact women's lives than those from the medical community.

References

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