"The transition from living *despite* cancer to living *with* cancer”
A qualitative study of self-perception and life of Breast Cancer Survivors

Mag. Johanna Breuer, Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Hanna Mayer

**Background**
Breast cancer is the most prevalent malignancy among women in the industrialized world. Due to early detection and improved treatment methods, the rate of long-term Breast Cancer Survivors increased over the last years and ranges now between 40-45%.

**Research questions**
Based on the experiences of Breast Cancer Survivors aspects of lifestyle and self-perception should be described and associated with theories of chronic disease. Insights into the experience of affected women should be given using the following questions:
- To what extent are the lives of Breast Cancer Survivors still affected by cancer?
- Which coping strategies do Breast Cancer Survivors use?
- Do Breast Cancer Survivors experience themselves as chronically ill?

**Method**
Nine qualitative interviews with Breast Cancer Survivors were conducted, transcribed and analysed using the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring.

**Results**
The diagnosis of breast cancer means the entry in a new reality for the women concerned. After completing treatment Breast Cancer Survivors still are confronted with after-effects and fear of recurrence on the one hand. On the other hand they aspire to get back to normality. Trying to accept the cancer experience and the new perception of cancer being a thing of the past is an effective way to integrate illness in their lives. The findings of the conducted study show a transition of self perception from an ill patient to a healthy Breast Cancer Survivor. This shift of perspectives between illness and health turns out to be a continuous challenge for the women concerned. However Breast Cancer Survivors cope with this situation and end up dealing with a new appreciation of living. Living despite cancer turns out to be living with cancer. This important shift means the unconscious transition from a patient to a Breast Cancer Survivor for the women concerned.

**Conclusion**
Surviving breast cancer means for the women concerned to have reached a milestone. Professional care needs to be supportive, offer guidance and meet the needs of Breast Cancer Survivors.