

Beyond the Clinic



The Pool as a Healing Environment during a Breast Cancer Experience

The Context of Illness

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2023, and it absolutely devastated my family. For someone so mindful of her health, she was the last person we thought would be faced with this horrible illness. The thought of losing my mom was a feeling I would not wish on anyone, but it was a feeling myself and my sister faced every day after the diagnosis.



Cancer never went easy on my mom. She went through constant testing, surgeries, long waiting periods, treatments, medication, and intense radiation. Over time, it became clear how exhausting it all was. As Hardon, Cartwright, and Manderson explain, “When people are subjected to a continuing assault of stressors, they can become exhausted and sick” (6). This really reflected my mom’s experience, because the treatment didn’t just affect her mentally, it was something her body carried every day.

Why the Pool?

During this time, the pool slowly became my mom’s and my family’s safe space. It was one of the only places where cancer didn’t feel like it was taking over everything. Being outside, surrounded by water, created a sense of calm that we couldn’t find in hospitals or waiting rooms. As Gesler explains, people often feel more comfort in familiar environments when they are going through illness (3). For us, the pool became a place to talk openly, cry when we needed to, laugh when we could, and hold onto moments that still felt normal.





The Meaning of Illness in Family Life

As my mom's illness continued I began to understand that cancer was not just something happening inside her body. It started to shape our routines, emotions, and the way we experienced everyday life as a family. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman explains that illness becomes a part of a person's "life trajectory," absorbing personal and social meaning from the world around them (5). This truly resonated with our experience. The pool was not just a place where my mom rested or recovered from cancer, but became tied to how we emotionally processed the illness together.



The Pool as a Healing Space

Unlike hospitals or clinics, the pool was not a place defined by illness. It was familiar, private, and part of our everyday lives long before cancer entered the picture. Since it had always been there, healing did not feel forced or scheduled. It unfolded naturally through our casual routines, movement, rest, and simply being together. In this way, the pool became part of how we coped with illness, rather than somewhere we went to treat it. This connects to anthropologist Thomas Csordas, who explains that healing is experienced through the body, meaning emotional stress and relief are physically felt in the spaces we inhabit (1).

When Treatment Ends, Healing Continues

Even after my mom's treatments ended, healing did not just stop. As medical anthropologists point out, "When curative cancer treatment is over, conventional health care takes on a less active role. However, the ill persons continue to struggle with complex and possibly changing needs" (4).

Although my mom was physically done fighting, the emotional recovery was ongoing. Sitting by the pool, reading, journalling, listening to music, tanning, watching the silly routines my sister and I would make for her, and of course, enjoying the refreshing cool down the pool had to offer was central to her mental health and healing, as well as the rest of my family's.



More Than a Cure

Throughout my mom's illness, the goal was always getting her feeling back to herself, and although treatments and medication were a part of that, physical and mental healing came from swimming laps, playing volleyball, racing and staying active. Not only did this help fuel her energy, but helped rebuild her strength and confidence.

Arthur Frank explains that "contemporary culture treats health as the normal condition that people ought to have restored" (2). In many ways this was true, as recovery focused on returning to normal life. But, my mom went beyond this "ought." She did not just quietly move on from cancer. She speaks about it openly and proudly, carrying her story with strength. Her healing was not only about restoring health, but about recognizing everything she endured to get there. As she carries her story with strength, I will carry forward the traditions of care and time spent by the pool that supported our healing.