

# Psyche of Young Adults with Cancer in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

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## Abstract

Cancer is a life-threatening disease. Cancer that adults get most frequently are cancers of the skin, lungs, colon, leukemia, bone and rectum. Nowadays, children are also getting affected by cancer. Cancer treatments like chemotherapy and radiotherapy have a physical impact and in turn which affects patients psychologically. This paper aims to bring out both the physical and psychological pain of young adults who are affected by different types of cancer and how they cope with the life-threatening situation with reference to the novel '*The Fault in Our Stars*' by John Green. This paper also tries to convey the readers about the sufferings of cancer patients and how it affects the psyche of their family members. It insists on the importance of care, love and attention to be provided to the cancer survivors, especially, Young Adults who lost their childhood while other children are enjoying their life.

**Keywords:** Physical health, Mental trauma, Chronic pain, Family, Coping, Social support

## 1. Introduction

Cancer is a disease of dysregulated cell division and differentiation. It is one of the major diseases which kills thousands of people. There are different types of cancer and each cancer varies in how fast they grow, where they spread and how they respond to the treatment. Some cancers are incurable even diagnosed in the earlier stages and it results in severe chronic pain with which they have to lead their remaining life. Cancer affects not only the body but also the mind and the patients experience significant changes in their emotional health. Many people from different age groups are getting diagnosed with cancer every day. This not only affects their physical health but also brings out certain kind of emotions that makes them pessimistic in their life. This study is going to analyze these factors in relation to the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, written by John Green.

## 2. Review of Literature

Imogen Belcher (2013) in the dissertation, "Curing cancer fiction: The Significance of Abjection within young adult novels about Cancer", brings out the thoughts of Hazel through the following lines: "Hazel's relationship with Augustus marks the primary means by which Hazel can protect herself from the abject. Her relationship with Augustus creates a distraction from the encompassing, abject nature of the cancer. Struggling with the restrictions her illness imposes she reminds herself that 'I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn't let it kill me before it kills me' (68)". Only after meeting Augustus, she becomes optimistic in her life and accepts reality.

In the article titled, "Coping with the onset of cancer: coping strategies and resources of young people with cancer" H. Kyngas et.al., (2001) conducted interview with fourteen adolescents and young adults aging from sixteen to twenty-two. This article focuses on the three main types of coping strategies such as emotion focused, appraisal-focused and problem-focused. Among this social support is a significant coping strategy that can create a positive impact and can make the patients believe in their mental strength. Family and friends are the sources for the social and emotional support.

In the article, "Supporting one another: the nature of family work when a young adult has cancer", Lynam MJ (1995) tells that young adult cancer patients not only need medicine but also love and support to improve their mental health. Family support plays an essential role in everyone's life. If a person from a family is affected by cancer, he/she needs the attention or support of the family. This will help them to cope and creates a positive impact on their health. Mitchell W, et.al., (2006) in their article, "Care and support needs of children and young people with cancer and their parents" implies the significance of family and social support. As family support is important to cope with mental illness so is psychosocial support. This is yet another factor that helps young adults with cancer and their families to support even more.

Baukje Miedema et.al., (2007) in their article, "From 'invincibility' to 'normalcy': Coping strategies of young adults during the cancer journey" explores the psychological impact of young adult cancer patients using coping strategies. It is a qualitative study and they have collected data through interview from fifteen young adult cancer patients. In their findings, they emphasize the importance of coping strategies and how it has instilled considerable amount of hope in young adult cancer patients. Though the result differed from person to

person, coping has its own positive effect when employed by them.

In their article, "The Role of psycho-oncology in the treatment of cancer patients", Parpiyeva OR and Mirzajonova ET emphasize the importance of knowing the mentality of young adult cancer patients. Before giving them mental support, it is important to know or to understand the psychological change or distress they are going through. Due to many external factors or depression, they may face negative changes psychologically, they may get disturbed emotionally, etc. All diseases cause changes in the human psyche too for oncological diseases it will be unique. So before helping young adult cancer patients to cope with their mental illness, it is necessary to know all about the psychological changes that is happening in them.

The article, "The Role of Social Support in Adolescent/Young Adults Coping with Cancer Treatment" by Sarah Pennant et.al., (2019) discusses the significance of social support in adolescent/young adults (AYA) cancer patients. It is a qualitative study and data is collected from AYA of age ranging from fifteen to twenty-six. They determine the data and shows how social support and coping with cancer will create a positive change in adolescent/young adult cancer patients.

Utari Onthoni, et.al., (2022) in their article, "Anxiety in John Green's The fault in our stars" talks about the different kinds of anxiety such as state anxiety and trait anxiety. As said by the authors the main character, Hazel Grace Lancaster has undergone trait anxiety. It also clearly shows the psychological health of Hazel and the way she reacts to the future happenings in her life because she is afraid of her future. Due to her cancer treatment, anxiety and stress increases day by day.

Rajeshwari S and Meenakshi S (2023) in their article, "The age of doom scrolling–Social media's attractive addiction" discusses the importance of support and care that should be given to those who are depressed and disturbed mentally. A person may have a large number of friends as a result of their participation in social networking. However, the nature and value of these connections are not always reliable. Patients with more social support tend to feel less anxious and less depressed. They lead better life compared to the patients who don't have any kind of support from family and friends. They need a friend or family or even a stranger to listen to them and to encourage them throughout their stressful journey.

In the thesis, "Psychological relationships in the fault in our stars novel: an analysis of social exchange" the author Fithroni (2017) analyses the relationship between the main characters, Hazel and Augustus. Two different theories have been employed in this thesis such as social exchange theory and Robert S. Fieldman's theory. Social exchange theory is used to analyze the relationship of the characters and Robert S. Fieldman's theory is used to analyze the friendship between them. Through the study, the author finds out that the relationship between Hazel and Augustus is stable.

### 2.1 Methodology

The researchers have used the Qualitative research method for the study. The materials for the study are gathered from various sources such as journal articles, books, theses and magazines. The psychological and physical pain of the characters is studied and analyzed by throwing the light on the young adult fiction, *The Fault in Our Stars*. Major characters that have been chosen for the study are Hazel Grace Lancaster, Augustus Waters and Issac. This study focuses on the psyche of young adults with cancer in relation to coping theory. A descriptive approach is used in this qualitative research study.

### 2.2 Research Gap

Various studies have been carried out on the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. But, so far, no research work has been done in relation to coping strategies. From different types of coping strategies, social support strategy has been used for the analysis as it acts as a medium of hope among cancer patients. For this research study, the researchers are taking three main characters from the novel for analysis.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

Coping is an effective way one can employ to retain their mental health during stress. As said by Somerfield and McCrae (2000), "Coping is defined as individual efforts made to manage distressing problems and emotions that affect the physical and psychological outcomes of stress". There are several coping strategies identified by many theorists and psychologists. Some of the major coping strategies are religious making, problem-focused coping strategy, emotion-focused coping strategy, social support and meaning-making. Among them, social support is an effective coping strategy to overcome difficulties.

In the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, all the characters have employed social support coping strategies to retain their mental health. Support group acts as a bridge for them where they regain their self-confidence through social support. Here, the supporting characters are Augustus, Issac, Hazel's mother and father. Receiving support from family and friends creates a huge impact on both the physical and mental health of cancer patients.

Both Hazel and Augustus' family support them in their difficult phases to make them happy. Initially, they feel annoyed by them. Later, they understand their parents' love for them and how they sacrificed their time, life to take care of them. Hazel also feels that her condition is affecting her parents' mental health and it makes her guilty and it is evident in the lines, "They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and omega of my parents' suffering". (Green, 2012 p. 116)

## 3. Discussion

In today's world, it is really difficult to maintain our mental health. Often, we feel isolated, anxious, distressed and depressed, that too, young adults are suffering even for minor problems. Young adult is a stage where they can enjoy and experience a lot about life. It is the

age of optimism and enthusiasm. But, in contrast, some young adults are suffering from certain diseases and have lost their childhood. One of the major diseases is cancer. Because of this, they lose hope in life, instead of experiencing and exploring their world of joy.

Cancer is a disease which makes patients feeble. It not only gives excruciating pain physically but also affects the psyche of the patients. The impact it creates on mental and physical health is intense. Although a few people recover from cancer, the treatment process is stressful and at times they feel isolated and dejected from life. Twenty-five percent of cancer survivors, suffer from post-trauma even after their recovery.

Anger is one of the common emotions that we get even for small problems in our life. But this may seriously affect cancer patients. Friends and family are likely feeling the same when handling a cancer patient, but not always at times. It's quite natural. Some other kinds of emotions that may hinder the life of cancer patients are anxiety, fear, depression, social stress and stress related to the psyche. Because of this, their daily life will get affected. It is important to recognize these changes and get help and give help when needed.

Childhood trauma creates a long-term impact on victims. The suffering of cancer patients is significantly expressed in the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* through the characters Hazel, Augustus and Isaac. Hazel Grace Lancaster, the protagonist of the novel *The Fault in Our Stars* experiences trauma from her childhood. She is a sixteen-year-old girl. She is diagnosed with thyroid cancer which later on spreads to her lungs. She becomes mentally depressed and she starts to think about her family and how they are going to face her death. She spends all her time alone thinking about death.

Abebe Yoftahe (2012) in the article titled, *Depression in Chronic Illness*, states that  
Depression symptoms can be emotional and /or physical. Emotionally, you might experience sadness, loss of interest in life.... you might also feel a sense of guilt, lack of hope as well as thoughts of death.... Depression can be caused by the illness itself and can also make your chronic condition worse. Symptoms such as pain, fatigue, isolation that are already present may be worsened because of depression.

She is neither happy nor has hope in her life. This is expressed in the following lines in the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, "But in fact, depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really." (Green, 2012 p. 3)

Hazel has undergone several surgeries and the chemotherapy treatment makes her fragile both physically and mentally. Her constant breathing problem makes her think about death. Because of her breathing problem, she has to always carry an oxygen tank with her. It even resulted her to be in the emergency room as she has suffered from intense pain. She has no confidence in herself and she doesn't even talk with others. Often, she spends her time alone reading books. Her physical and mental health has made her distance herself from other people. It is evident through the lines,

I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there's nothing I can do about hurting you; you're too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I'm not depressed and I can't be a regular teenager, because I'm a grenade. (Green, 2012 p. 99)

Hazel takes medication to expand her life rather than treating the thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs. Though, she has a lot to go through, she concentrates on positivities of life. She enjoys jokes, reading novels, moments with her parents and also her relationship with 17-year-old Augustus Waters who is also diagnosed with Osteosarcoma. As, said by Susan Gubar in one of her blogs, published in New York Times,

Like many sick children, Hazel displays unusual maturity. Pulled out of school, she has spent inordinate amounts of time learning at home. In the process, she has had to cope with a dysfunctional body, with terrifying breakdowns in the I.C.U., with lugging around an oxygen tank and sleeping with a machine that forces air "in and out of my crap lungs." Precocious, she fully comprehends the double-binds of chemical that extend her life by disabling her.

Augustus Waters is one of the major characters in the novel. He has lost his leg because of Osteosarcoma. Unlike, Hazel, he has different ideas about death. He wants to face his death without fear in contrast, Hazel always thinks about death. He always used to play video games. In his remission stage, Augustus' cancer reappears and it makes him very depressed. His health deteriorates and he becomes fragile as he takes medications that are heavy in dosage. His body gets too weak, he struggles to walk, he even urinates in his bed and ends up in a wheel chair. Reappearance of cancer, cancer treatments and dosage of medications have a great impact on Augustus' mental and physical health in the last phase of his life. As mentioned earlier, his condition becomes worse and it is evident through the following line, "Augustus sat in the driver's seat, covered in his own vomit, his hands pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in." (Green, 2012

p. 244) This makes him think in a most painful way i.e., he wants his friends to prepare a eulogy for him when he is alive. Because he knows that the time for him is short. This shows how the pain and suffering has affected his mental health.

Isaac is a friend of Augustus and later encounters Hazel. Isaac is suffering from eye cancer. He has lost one of his eyesight. He suffers a lot because he is going to lose another eye too. Even though he knows that he is going to lose his entire vision, his self-confidence makes him survive. His girlfriend Monica has left him. This makes him depressed and he starts to break the things of Augustus to vent out his anger. Isaac's feelings are expressed in the novel as "Augustus stepped toward him and looked down. "Feel better?" he asked. "No," Isaac mumbled, his chest heaving. "That's the thing about pain," Augustus said, and then glanced back at me. "It demands to be felt". Pain demands to be felt. (Green, 2012 p. 63)

Similarly, there are other novels that deals with the same themes to that of the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. For example, the novel *Just One Wish* by Janette Rallison explores the life of a seventeen-year-old girl, Annika who wish to do anything for his brother, Jeremy. He is diagnosed with brain tumour. Throughout the novel, Annika is there for him as lovable sister and as a strong supporter. Another novel *Zac and Mia* by A. J. Betts deals with the young adult cancer patients. Zac is diagnosed with leukemia and Mia is diagnosed with Osteosarcoma. They are getting treatment from the same hospital and there they develop an unbreakable bond which creates a positive impact in them and in their life. Being cancer patients, they are supportive to each other which in term helped them to fight the darkness. In both the novels, the characters use coping strategy to overcome stress and to sustain their mental health.

Coping strategy is a significant tool to overcome stress, depression and anxiety. There are different types of coping strategies and anyone can employ it in order to deal with their stressful situations. Social support is a type of coping strategy that is employed by the characters in the novel. Cancer patients can also use this strategy to strengthen their mental health amidst of their agonizing experiences. Social support includes emotional support, informational support, financial support, guidance, infinite love and care, etc. We get this support from our family, friends, teachers, neighbours and even from pets. Support group is one such category in social support. It is like a community which spreads positivity.

As mentioned earlier, there are different types of social support which helps in enhancing the mental health of the characters in the novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. The characters such as Hazel, Augustus and Isaac have employed and utilized some of the social support strategy. It helped them to face their problems and simultaneously strengthened their mental health. Two major types of social support include emotional support, being there for others when needed. Isaac is affected with eye cancer and due to which he loses eye sight. This makes him depressed. At this stage, Augustus becomes a shoulder for him to lean on. Whenever Isaac is depressed Augustus has been there to support him emotionally and with his help Isaac comes out of his depressive state. Informational support which means giving advice, proper guidance, etc giving to the person who needs it the most. In the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, the characters Augustus, Hazel and Isaac get informational support through support group. This group provides them proper guidance and strengthens their psyche in a way which instills hope in them.

Support group plays an important role in the novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. It is a place for cancer patients to share their emotions and feelings. The characters in the novel became friends in the support group. At first, the protagonist Hazel hesitates to go to the support group. Because of her mother, she goes to that group, weekly. She feels it as a depressed thing. According to her, the support group is,

The support group, of course, was depressing as hell. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone – walled Episcopal church shaped like cross. We all sat in a circle right in the middle of the cross, where the two boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been. (Green, 2012 p. 4)

In the Support group, she met Augustus Waters who came there to support his friend Issac. Patrick is the leader of the group who has cancer in his ball. Initially, Hazel refuses to go there. She did not understand the purpose of the group. Later, she understands the importance of the support group, where she can share her feelings and also realized that she is not the only one who is suffering from cancer, but there are different people with different types of cancer, some of which are not curable. Then she values the love and mutual assistance she gets from the people in the support group, which helps her to cope mentally. As said by Kendra Cherry (2020), 'Talking to people who are going through the same experience can often be a source of support, empathy and motivation'.

Diane Mapes tells how significant is support group in cancer patients' life. She says about cancer patients, especially, young adults, "They're experiencing something they can't explain to them. And it's hard to take the life back even if they're cured. How do you go back to being a normal teenager when you've faced death? That's why I think support groups are helpful, whether it's in person or through social media". We can draw an example from a real-life cancer survivor named, Lauren Aslanian. Dr. Ivan Kirov (2022) shares an inspiring story of a young adult, Lauren Aslanian who has been diagnosed with stage three lymphoma at the age of fifteen. Like support group in the novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, Lauren utilizes the support provided from CHOC's Adolescent and young adult treatment program. This program conducts social events every week in order to support cancer patients. This program helped Lauren in many ways to overcome her darkness and to retain her hope. As a result, Lauren has become a member of the nursing program at Duke University. Dr. Ivan also underlines the importance of peer support from Lauren's words, 'CHOC's Adolescent and young adult program helped me to realize the psychosocial impact of a cancer diagnosis and importance of peer support'. From this it is evident that support group play a major role and creates a positive impact in the life of young adult cancer patients.

If a person is socially active and participates in social networking, then he/she may have a lot of friends. But these friends or the connections he/she get through social network will not be always reliable. Patients with more social support tend to feel less anxious and less depressed. They lead better life compared to the patients who don't have any kind of support from family and friends. They need a friend or family or even a stranger to listen to them and to encourage them throughout their stressful journey.

Patients enjoy nothing, nor do the family members. Several studies have revealed that the families of cancer patients usually suffer from psychological problems such as depression, and anxiety because they may be new to face such a critical situation. When diagnosed with cancer, the patients may feel insecure even with their loved ones. As humans, we are reluctant or hesitant to accept the reality. But to overcome difficulties and to survive we have to cherish each and every moment in our life. As far as cancer patients are concerned people around them should understand their emotions. Being diagnosed with any type of cancer can be a shock not only to the patient but also to the family members as well. There are several ways for families and friends to support young adults with cancer. Some of the best possible ways are as follows: Firstly, enough sleep. Even people without any ailments need good sleep for their better health. Just think of the cancer patients... As they undergo innumerable physical and psychological pain, it is enough sleep that gives rest to their mind and body. It is the prime responsibility of the family to create such environment.

Secondly, Family and Friends support. Cancer patients get upset and gloomy because of the pain they endure. This even makes them fragile and give up living this terrible life. It is families and friends who should make them strong with their encouraging words, care and love. This makes them to lead the rest of their life strongly and smoothly. Also, cherishing every moment with them and fulfilling even their small wishes will make them happy. Lastly, accepting the reality is the main part of life rather than running from it.

As we speak of family and friends support, it is evident that through social support young adult cancer patients can cope with the hurdles of their daily life. They can also cope with the stress which is a result of mental and physical change they undergo because of cancer treatment. This has been proved in the following article titled, "Relationship between posttraumatic growth and perceived social support for adolescents with cancer" by Ekim A and Ocakci AF (2015). The major aim of this paper is to expose their reaction to cancer and how well they perceive social support as to cope with their condition. They have taken 108 cancer survivors ranging from twelve to eighteen years of age. Among them fifty-two percentage are female. For this study the authors have used multidimensional scale of perceived social support. Findings of this paper include, 'Survivors perceived social support from families as the greatest followed by social support from friends and a special person' (Avril Deegan et al., 2023).

The patients who are diagnosed with cancer are not responsible for what they are or what they experience in their life. No one is responsible for this deadliest disease. We should not blame them or neglect them instead we should accept the cancer patients with enough love and care. Not only family and friends should take responsibility but also society play a key role in everyone's life. So, as a society, we must shower them with hope to make their life better.

More than giving hope and support there is another important thing we as a society should do i.e., educating ourselves about cancer, the dreadful disease and its impact on cancer patients' body. It is clear from what Diane Mapes expresses, "if a cancer patient says he/she has trouble walking, instead of understanding people ask the question, why? They don't understand how the drugs affect...people don't know what it's doing to your body. I think people need more of an eye opener to childhood cancers. They need more of an education about it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Cancer is the deadliest disease which pulls down one's life into darkness. But enough care, love and enduring support from friends and family can bring light to the lives of cancer patients. The support of family and friends plays a major role in a cancer patient's life. Giving them enough love and care will help them even to cross the throbbing phase with a smile. Hazel and Augustus appeal to the readers through their sense of humour, self-confidence and courage. They hide all their sadness behind their smiling face just to make their parents happy. Through this study, the researcher wants to emphasize that cancer not only touches the victims but also touches all those who love them. Be sensitive to your loved one's feelings and encourage him or her to talk freely, relax his/her mind, listen to good music, change the family circumstance to the patient's convenience and keep the soul peaceful to overcome the pain. Cancer patients can overcome their traumatic experience of cancer through various coping strategies. Social support is one of the most effective coping strategies they can employ to vanquish their fear and anxiety.

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