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**In Search of Self –**  
**The Hospitalisation Experiences**  
**of Children with Cancer**

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts in Psychology  
at Massey University*

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There comes a time when we are faced  
with letting go all that feels important to us,  
so that we may fly on the winds of life.

In turn we set free that which we have held important  
so that it too may soar  
into its own power and fulfil its potential.

That time has come for me.

I open my heart to the will of life that is deep inside of me,  
and send forth across the heavens a cry of pain and sorrow that soars  
on the wings of opportunity as I set myself free.

- author unknown

## ABSTRACT

Cancer is the second most common cause of death in children in the Western world. The diagnosis and treatment process is painful and distressing, and is carried out in the hospital environment. This environment is foreign to most children, and influences children's coping with the experience of having cancer. Research in this area has focussed on assessing coping responses, and designing interventions for the pain, distress and anxiety associated with the medical procedures. There have also been studies which have measured the prevalence of emotional and behavioural difficulties in children with cancer. No studies have been conducted into children's experiences of hospital expressed in their own terms. The aim of the present study was to elicit the hospital experiences of children with cancer. Interviews were conducted with seven children, aged 5 - 15 years, who had completed treatment for cancer within the previous two years. An interpretive phenomenological design was utilised in order to gain and analyse accounts of the participants' perceptions and experiences. Findings suggest that the experiences can be interpreted in terms of two themes underlying the experiences of children with cancer, and their coping responses. The first theme is 'Retaining a sense of self-as-normal', which describes efforts to 'Maintain links with familiar people' and 'Becoming 'at home' in hospital'. The second theme is 'Incorporating multiple selves', which are 'Self-as-body-in-pain', 'Self-as-confined', 'Self-as-patient' and 'Self-as-survivor-living-with-cancer'. Success in retaining a sense of self-as-normal both affects, and is influenced by, the incorporation of multiple selves. Implications of these themes for practice in terms of the assessment of coping responses, design of interventions, and the measurement of outcomes, are suggested.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT		i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		ii
Chapter One	INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.....	1
	The Context of the Experience.....	2
	Childhood Cancer - The Nature of the Uninvited Guest .....	2
	Changed Landscape .....	7
	The Physical Environment .....	7
	The People.....	9
	Language .....	12
	Summary .....	13
Chapter Two	THE LITERATURE .....	14
	Coping and the Coping Episode.....	14
	Coping Measures.....	16
	Coping Styles .....	17
	Coping Responses to Paediatric Oncology Medical Treatments .....	24
	Behavioural Coping Responses during Procedures .....	25
	Intervention Studies for Behavioural Coping Responses .....	32
	Psychological Adjustment.....	37
	Family Functioning .....	38
	Depression.....	38
	Body Image.....	41
	Self-Esteem .....	42
	Communication.....	44
	Conceptual and Methodological Issues.....	47
Chapter Three	INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY .....	50
	Ontology.....	51

	Epistemology .....	52
	Theoretical Perspective .....	55
	Methodology: Phenomenology .....	56
	The Relationship between Researcher and Researched .....	58
	Phenomenology and Validity .....	60
Chapter Four	METHOD.....	63
	Nature of the Sample.....	63
	Recruitment.....	66
	Response Process .....	67
	Data Collection .....	67
	Setting .....	67
	Procedure .....	68
	The Interview .....	68
	Data Analysis .....	70
	Bracketed Information .....	74
	Ethical Approval .....	77
Chapter Five	RETAINING A SENSE OF SELF-AS-NORMAL .....	80
	Maintaining Links with Familiar People .....	81
	Parents.....	81
	Siblings .....	84
	Peers .....	85
	Teachers .....	86
	Becoming at Home in the Hospital.....	87
	Engaging in Child-Like Activities.....	88
	Becoming Familiar with the Physical Environment .....	90
	Gaining Knowledge of the Routines in the Hospital .....	95
	Summary .....	97
Chapter Six	INCORPORATING MULTIPLE SELVES.....	99
	Self-as-Body-in-Pain.....	100

	Self-as-Confined .....	105
	Self-as-Patient .....	111
	Self-as-Survivor-Living-with-Cancer .....	122
	Summary .....	124
Chapter Seven	DISCUSSION .....	125
	Linking Analyses with the Literature.....	125
	The Normal Self.....	127
	Incorporation of Selves .....	130
	Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study Design .....	135
	Future Research Directions .....	138
	Implications for Practice .....	138
	Concluding Comment .....	140
REFERENCES	.....	141
APPENDICES	.....	152