

BMJ Open

Perceptions of coping with non-disease related life stress for women with osteoarthritis: a qualitative analysis

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| Journal: | <i>BMJ Open</i> |
| Manuscript ID | bmjopen-2015-010630 |
| Article Type: | Research |
| Date Submitted by the Author: | 23-Nov-2015 |
| Complete List of Authors: | Harris, Melissa; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing Byles, Julie; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing Townsend, Natalie; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing Loxton, Deborah; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing |
| Primary Subject Heading: | Qualitative research |
| Secondary Subject Heading: | Rheumatology |
| Keywords: | psychological stress, coping, osteoarthritis, women, ageing |
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3 ***Perceptions of coping with non-disease related life stress for women***
4 ***with osteoarthritis: a qualitative analysis***
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ABSTRACT

Objective: Coping with arthritis-related stress has been extensively studied. However, limited evidence exists regarding coping with stress extraneous to the disease (life stress). This study explored life stress and coping in a subset of older women with osteoarthritis from a larger longitudinal study.

Design: A qualitative study using semi-structured telephone interviews.

Participants: Women who indicated being diagnosed or treated for arthritis in the previous three years in the fifth survey of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (conducted in 2007) provided the sampling frame. Potential participants were randomly sampled by a blinded data manager using a random number generator.

Methods and Analysis: Potential participants were mailed a letter of invitation/participant information statement by the ALSWH. Invitations were sent out in small batches (primarily ten). Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved using a systematic process (n=19). Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Data were thematically analysed.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed that coping with life stress involved both stable attitudinal coping processes developed early in life (i.e. stoicism) and transient cognitive and support-based responses. Women also described a dualistic process involving a reduction in the ability to cope with ongoing stress over time, coupled with personal growth.

Conclusions: This is the first study to examine how individuals cope with non-arthritis related stress. The findings add to the current understanding of stress and coping, and have implications regarding the prevention of arthritis in women. Importantly, this study highlighted the potential detrimental impact of persistent coping patterns developed early in life. Public health campaigns aimed at stress mitigation and facilitation of adaptive coping mechanisms in childhood and adolescence may assist with arthritis prevention.

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3 **Keywords:** psychological stress, coping, osteoarthritis, women, ageing
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7 **Strengths and limitations of this study**
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- 9
- 10 • This is the first study to examine how women with osteoarthritis cope with non-
11 arthritis related stress
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 - 13 • Although women with osteoarthritis used similar approaches to coping with life stress
14 as has been reported for arthritis-related stress, fewer life-stress coping strategies were
15 identified. Life-stress coping strategies were focused on cognitive and help-seeking
16 approaches, with a strong reliance on stoicism.
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 - 18 • This study focused on retrospective accounts of coping with life stress using a sample
19 of women who had osteoarthritis as their primary diagnosis. The results may not be
20 generalisable to women with other rheumatic conditions or males with osteoarthritis.
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INTRODUCTION

Considerable interest has been generated around understanding the role of psychosocial factors in influencing disease trajectories. In particular, research has increasingly highlighted the role of psychological stress in the aetiology and progression of chronic disease.¹⁻³ The role of psychological stress in the onset, and course of disease has been highlighted as particularly pertinent for women, with research suggesting that women are exposed to a greater number of life stressors and have a tendency to perceive stressors as more stressful than men.⁴ Arthritis in particular has been found to be a major cause of disability, limited mobility and chronic pain in women.⁵ The majority of stress-related research has focused on the occurrence of chronic major and minor life events.⁶⁻⁸ However, the way in which individuals perceive stress, coupled with the coping strategies employed to reduce the impact of stress have been found to be more important than the exposure to a stressor.⁹

Studies have consistently demonstrated that coping strategies employed by an individual in response to a stressful event have a significant impact on psychological as well as physical outcomes.¹⁰⁻¹² In terms of coping with arthritis, passive or emotion-focused coping has been found to be associated with increased arthritis pain, disability and depression in comparison to those who employ active (problem-based) coping strategies.^{10,13,14} Meanwhile, a qualitative study of Canadian adults involved in a self-management program (aged 45-78), found that stress was the *'biggest factor'* in their lives. Coping involved *'just getting through the day'* or participating in leisure-time activities in order to achieve *'enjoyment'* or *'balance'*.¹⁵ On the other hand, Tak¹⁶ identified cognitive, behavioural or social diversion-based activities and assertive actions (e.g. directly addressing the problem by seeking a solution or talking to someone) were found to reduce the effects of stress in those with arthritis. More recently, psychological adjustment to arthritis over time was found to be attributed primarily to cognitive and attitudinal factors including stoicism and making downward comparisons).¹⁷

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3 Importantly, coping with arthritis was viewed as a dynamic 'day to day' process involving a
4 constant struggle between grieving physical losses and increasing dependence amidst
5 symptom management.
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10 While a large body of evidence exists regarding arthritis-specific coping strategies,^{18,19}
11 limited evidence exists regarding coping with stress extraneous to arthritis (i.e. life stress).
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13 Harris and colleagues²⁰ recently demonstrated in a longitudinal cohort study, that perceived
14 stress is a critical modifiable risk factor for arthritis onset in older women. Women
15 chronically experiencing high stress levels had a 2.4-fold increase in developing arthritis
16 compared to women who experienced no stress. Understanding women's coping patterns
17 (including their origin) may assist in further elucidating the stress-chronic disease
18 relationship. Studies focused on understanding this concept are currently lacking. It is
19 important to understand whether women with arthritis cope with life stress differently to how
20 they cope with arthritis-related stress. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to expand upon
21 the recent quantitative evidence concerning the relationship between stress and arthritis onset
22 by exploring non-disease related stress-coping processing in a sub-sample of women with
23 arthritis. With the majority of arthritis diagnoses driven by osteoarthritis, the experiences of
24 women with osteoarthritis formed the focus of this study. A qualitative approach was applied
25 in order to capture the personal meaning associated with stress and the complexities
26 surrounding cognitive appraisal.²¹
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46 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

47 **Ethical approval**

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50 Ethical approval was granted for all aspects of the project by the University of Newcastle's
51 Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection, with all
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3 interviews and verbal consent procedures carried out in accordance with the University of
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5 Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee policies regarding telephone interviewing.
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8 **Participant sampling frame**

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11 Participants were sampled from the 1946-1951 cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study
12 on Women's Health (ALSWH).^{22,23} Women who indicated being diagnosed or treated for
13 arthritis at survey 5 (conducted in 2007) and meeting the inclusion criteria (i.e. fluent in
14 English, did not have a proxy (e.g. carer) complete their surveys, or had not withdrawn from
15 either the longitudinal study or further sub-studies) were included in the sampling frame
16 (n=2,802). Potential participants were then randomly selected from the remaining pool by a
17 blinded data manager using a random number generator. A sample of 60 women meeting the
18 inclusion criteria was initially drawn, assuming a 50% response rate. Women however were
19 sampled until data saturation had been reached. Key demographic and health-related factors
20 such as education, area of residence, Body Mass Index, physical activity and health-related
21 quality of life were monitored throughout the recruitment process in order to achieve a
22 diverse sample.
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38 **Recruitment process**

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41 Potential participants randomly selected from the study participant pool were mailed a letter
42 of invitation/participant information statement by the ALSWH. Invitations were sent out in
43 small batches (primarily ten). Potential participants were contacted by the research team
44 (MLH) two to four weeks following the mailout in order to gain informed consent and clarify
45 osteoarthritis diagnosis.
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53 **Interview process**

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3 The interview process has been described in detail elsewhere.¹⁷ Briefly, to ensure consistency
4 in data collection, the semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author (MLH), a
5 PhD candidate with a background in psychology and post graduate training in qualitative
6 research (who had no personal experience of osteoarthritis and was not in the sampled age
7 bracket). All semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted at the offices of the
8 Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing located at the University of Newcastle and
9 digitally recorded. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, participants provided verbal
10 consent. The provision of informed verbal consent was more appropriate to written consent to
11 reduce participant burden. While interviews were primarily guided by the interview schedule,
12 participants were able to direct the conversation and concentrate on issues they felt were most
13 important. During (and after) the interview, field notes were collected. These included points
14 of interest to follow-up, the emotional condition of the participant, impressions of the
15 interview and a summary of significant findings. Interviews ranged in duration from 15
16 minutes to 2 hours 50 minutes, with an average time of 1 hour 10 minutes.
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35 **Semi-structured interview schedule**

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38 The semi-structured interview was retrospective in nature. Interview questions were designed
39 to guide women to reflect upon their life experiences (i.e. stressors) and coping mechanisms
40 across the life course (including during their childhood and early adult years, at the time of
41 arthritis diagnosis and post-diagnosis). Consistent with a realist-orientated approach (i.e.
42 aiming to explain the phenomenon with a degree of objectivity),²⁴ the main interview
43 questions were open-ended. This provided an environment for the participant to tell their
44 story without direction from the interviewer. While the main questions provided a certain
45 amount of structure in order to conduct the interview, they were not prescriptive. To provide
46 the contextual material necessary to understand the phenomenon, the content of the interview
47 was ultimately co-determined by both the researcher and participant.
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Data analysis

Women were sampled until 'data saturation' had been reached using a systematic process similar to Francis and colleagues²⁵ which recommended an *a priori* sample size of ten be set, and a stopping criterion of three for structured interviews. Due to the diverse nature of the interview schedule and semi-structured approach, an initial sample size of 15 was established, with a stopping criterion of three. The stopping criterion was employed in order to determine the point when no more themes (or sub-themes) were identified in the data. The stopping criterion was tested after each successive interview. At the point when three successive interviews had been analysed without further thematic identification, data saturation was said to be achieved. As the final two interviews were carried out in succession, this criterion was exceeded by one.

Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. All interview transcripts were checked for accuracy (MLH) and the data were entered into the qualitative management program Nvivo v.9 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2010) for analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, with data coded by the first author (MLH) following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke.²⁶ Briefly, finalised transcripts were systematically read and re-read prior to thematic coding to obtain an overall sense of the data,²⁷ with patterns and meanings identified. Phase two involved generating initial codes from the raw data. Transcripts were read in a line by line fashion, giving equal attention to each data item within the dataset, with sections of text relevant to the research entered into Nvivo as free standing 'nodes' (i.e. categories). Throughout the coding process, all transcripts were repeatedly reviewed and analysed. Similarities and differences were constantly compared to each other in an iterative fashion, with similar phenomena (or similar aspects of a phenomenon) grouped together. Comparisons were made within and across transcripts.²⁸ The refinement of higher order concepts (i.e. themes) involved ensuring that the generated codes

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3 formed coherent patterns within and across the datasets with disconfirming, as well as
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5 confirming evidence sought.²⁹⁻³¹ The first author reviewed and discussed the content of the
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7 identified themes and example extracts on multiple occasions with the senior author (DL) to
8
9 ensure that the themes accurately reflected the participants' narratives.
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12 **Additional participant information**

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15 The following demographic variables (described in detail by Harris and colleagues^{20,32}) were
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17 used to provide participant characteristics: age, marital status, highest educational
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19 qualification, occupation, area of residence and country of birth.
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22 **RESULTS**

23 **Participant characteristics**

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26 Nineteen women (out of 44 invited to take part) with an average age of 62.5±1.3 years at the
27
28 time of the interviews participated in the interviews. All women had osteoarthritis as their
29
30 primary diagnosis, with three women reporting rheumatic comorbidity. Participants had been
31
32 diagnosed more than four years prior to the interview, with the majority (n=11/19) first
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34 reporting their diagnosis at survey 3 (conducted in 2001). Additional sociodemographic
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36 characteristics are shown in Table 1.
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43 **Summary of themes**

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46 Women with osteoarthritis described experiencing stressful life events revolving around
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48 death, illness and relationship strain. A number of women also reported an accumulation of
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50 stress over the life course. However, coping with life stress over time was found to be
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52 complex. Coping has been identified as important in the mitigation of the stress response and
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54 facilitation of psychological adjustment following stress exposure. The following provides a
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56 discussion surrounding the coping strategies employed by participants in dealing with life
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3 stress, the patterns of coping that emerged over time, and factors that influenced
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5 psychological adjustment to life stress.
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8 **Theme 1: Approaches to coping with stress**

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11 Women with osteoarthritis identified a number of strategies for minimising the immediate
12 effects of life stress. Health behavioural approaches such as physical activity were rarely
13 reported by the women. Participants most often reported utilising either help-seeking
14 practices, cognitive-based coping or drew upon personal belief systems and attitudes in order
15 to deal with life stress.
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18 Help-seeking and support-based approaches

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21 Eighteen women reported that seeking support from others was particularly important as a
22 means of coping with life stress. While some women sought emotional support from a variety
23 of sources, other women described being more constrained in their choices. For women who
24 valued this coping approach and had difficult or generationally stereotypical relationships
25 with their spouses (i.e. where emotional expression and empathy were not core features of the
26 relationship) “*he would no sooner talk about his feelings than fly to the moon*” [Participant
27 5], this involved seeking informal support from individuals outside the marital union.
28 Children, siblings, friends or other women “*full of wisdom*” within the community were
29 identified as key sources:
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46 *there are inspirational women out there. They have been through the black hole, you*
47 *know through that tunnel of life, there is nothing they haven't been through you know*
48 *between you know ill children, dying children, gay children, whatever children,*
49 *divorces ...* [Participant 11]
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3 A number of women also spoke about receiving professional help regarding their problems
4 and sought counsel from psychologists, psychiatrists, grief counsellors, general practitioners
5 or other alternative and complementary health practitioners as well as attending self-
6 development courses. Seeking help from others facilitated an emotional release, a factor that
7 was seen as pivotal to the maintenance of good mental health:
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15 *I think the main thing is to be able to talk about it ... You know some people sort of,*
16 *they clam up and they don't talk about it, well they're the ones that really have the*
17 *breakdowns aren't they?* [Participant 9].
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22 A few women also used 'information seeking' practices in order to reduce the impact of a
23 stressor. This was particularly useful when the stressor related to the illness of a spouse or
24 family member. For one participant whose husband was possibly in the early stages of
25 Alzheimer's disease, the ability to source information from the internet was viewed as a
26 "God send" for her and others that live in "less developed parts of the countryside". For her,
27 having information readily available either dispelled concerns regarding the source of stress
28 or provided a sense of control over the situation in which plans to combat the issue could be
29 outlined. Being educated about the source of stress was also supported by other participants,
30 "the more you know, it does stop you worrying" [Participant 12].
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43 Cognitive approaches

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46 Women often spoke about using cognitive approaches to modify their thoughts surrounding
47 life stressors. These practices included mind blocking strategies or distraction in order "to not
48 dwell on all th[e] kind of crap that happens" and 'put [the stress] back where it belongs"
49 [Participant 11]. Activities that provided distraction included reading, watching television,
50 listening to music, bird watching, paid work, playing with a pet and being involved in craft
51 activities. These activities were reported to have a calming effect and facilitated relaxation.
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3 Women also employed positive self-talk, although to a lesser extent. These techniques
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5 allowed for the participant to either minimise or discount the stress they were experiencing:
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8 *sometimes you know you can be feeling down and, and you've, and you have to say to*
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10 *yourself well come on it's in your mind, ... it's not as bad as you think it is. It's just*
11
12 *the way you're feeling ...* [Participant 5].
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15 Other cognitive processes (paralleling arthritis-specific coping efforts) included the use of
16 comparative coping (i.e. comparing their stress with others) in order to normalise stress:
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20 *I've been divorced once um infertile for a lot of years ... lost a baby at three days old,*
21
22 *my husband had um a stage two melanoma and then bowel cancer and just the usual*
23
24 *problems ... normal life when you think of it compared to most other people*
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26
27 [Participant 13].
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30 Faith-based approaches
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32 Religious or faith-based coping was identified by a minority of women (n=6) as important to
33 coping with stress, “...even though I'm not a church goer now I still have very strong faith
34 and I do think that ... has helped me right through life face things” [Participant 5]. This type
35 of coping not only related to formal prayer and belief in Christianity, but also included
36 engagement in meditation in order to promote emotional expression. Formal prayer methods
37 were often used by participants when other coping strategies had been exhausted and the
38 participant could no longer carry the burden, “when I feel like it's getting too heavy and I
39 can't carry it anymore that's when I hand it over [to God] ...” [Participant 19].
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3 Stoicism

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5 Being stoic and repressing (or denying) emotions was consistently chosen as an attitudinal-
6
7 based coping strategy by the participants (n=15). This type of coping was particularly noted
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9 in response to traumatic stress or the compounding of life events:
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13 *my mother took us kids and we left my father in I suppose I was about seven or eight*
14
15 *um ... and we sort of soldiered on on our own, and then um I met my late husband ...*
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17 *We had 28 years, three children, he passed away, then I met my current husband and*
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19 *here we are ... things like that they make you bottle it up* [Participant 3].
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23 In response to dealing with her daughter and husband having cancer at the same time, one
24
25 participant commented “... *that’s the sort of person I am I just cope. You have to do it and I*
26
27 *had to be there for her because there was no one else and you just do it*” [Participant 18].
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30 Other women provided a similar analysis of the stress they experienced often simply
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32 suggesting that “*I just had to get on with it, there was no time to dwell on things*” [Participant
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34 4].
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36 37 **Theme 2: Origins of coping responses**

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39 Although the participants reported coping with life stress through either cognitive, help-
40
41 seeking, attitudinal or faith-based practices, coping with stress did not appear to be a dynamic
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43 process. Throughout the course of the interviews, distinct patterns regarding the ways in
44
45 which women with osteoarthritis approached life stress over time emerged. Coping responses
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47 particularly during times of intense stress were often a result of unconscious mechanisms that
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49 emerged early in life (n=14). The women often indicated that the ability to cope was either an
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51 intrinsic quality (i.e. being born like that), a result of a “*survival*” mechanism or the influence
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53 of parent-driven coping characteristics taken on at an early age, “*we were brought up to be*
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3 *strong*” [Participant 10]. One participant in particular noted that having been brought up by a
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5 single mother she learned to “*just get on with things*”:
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8 *Well we got taught when we were quite young ‘cause mum had to bring the two of us*
9
10 *up on her own to you know you’ve got to just get on with life no matter what happens*
11
12 *to you you’ve got to just pick yourself up and get on with things. You don’t dwell on*
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14 *things or else you’ll go under* [Participant 2].
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18 Women with osteoarthritis appeared to repeatedly choose coping mechanisms developed in
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20 childhood across the life course and often modelled their “*very strong sort of character*” on a
21
22 significant caregiver. For one participant, the ability to “*soldier on*” [Participant 19] in the
23
24 face of stress was described as an admirable and necessary quality that she modelled from her
25
26 mother. Another participant applied the coping responses learned during childhood to coping
27
28 with having her daughter and husband diagnosed with cancer at the same time:
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32 *my mother was a very strong person. I think she had to be to get through our*
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34 *childhood ... she had quite a few setbacks in her life but I think that’s where I get it*
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36 *from. I am a lot like her ...* [Participant 18].
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40 Thus, coping with early experiences had long-term implications, shaping the way in which
41
42 the women approached not only future stressful life experiences, but their view of life in
43
44 general.
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47 **Theme 3: Changes in coping with life stress over time**

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50 Coping responses employed by the participants were often developed early in life and
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52 persisted across the life course. Consistently coping with psychosocial stressors using the
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54 same strategies, although adaptive in the short-term, were described as being detrimental to
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56 both physical and mental health over the long-term. The persistent use of attitudinal-based
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3 coping resources such as the stoic “*just get on with it*” approach were reported to coincide
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5 with a reduced ability to cope with ongoing stress. This process was often described by
6
7 participants as a “*loss of resilience*”. For the majority of participants, new coping strategies
8
9 were sought only when strategies used in the past began to fail. For some participants, the
10
11 quest for new and effective coping strategies was a difficult process. As one participant
12
13 indicated “*I think I’ve lost some of my ability to manage my stress and I haven’t found ...*
14
15 *something that works*” [Participant 10].
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18
19 The majority of women described having barrelled through life where the burden of
20
21 responsibility and expectations associated with being a woman allowed participants to get
22
23 through difficult and often traumatic times
24

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26
27 *When you are so busy ... you don’t become stressed because you don’t have time to*
28
29 *think about it. You don’t have time to worry you, you’re only concern is oh my God*
30
31 *I’ve got three kids at home, I’ve still got to put a meal on the table for them ...*
32
33 [Participant 13].
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35
36 Over time, however, this method of coping was ineffective and detrimental to both their
37
38 physical and mental health. A lack of time promoted the use of survival coping, with the
39
40 effects of this process only evident once chronic stressors were removed. This self-sacrificing
41
42 mentality facilitated some women remaining in stressful situations despite their own needs
43
44 and health, “*I guess I just pressed on regardless of my own health needs*” [Participant 4].
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48 **Theme 4: Surviving life stress**

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51 Coping with stress over time ultimately appeared to be dualistic in nature. While the majority
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53 of women reported experiencing psychosocial stress over the life course, a number of women
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55 described an ability to see the ‘silver lining’ in their experiences. This process of ‘stress-
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3 related growth' was vital to long-term psychological adjustment. This theme describes the
4 factors participants perceived as important in the reappraisal of life stress over time. Stressful
5 experiences were viewed by participants as character building, assisting in the cultivation of
6 empathy for others, "*it just made me more caring for other people and gave me more*
7 *empathy I do think*" [Participant 14] and presented a learning experience. For instance:
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15 *I think you don't know what's in you until you are solely tested, that's what I tell my*
16 *kids, we don't know what strengths we have and it's easy when you're cruising along*
17 *but that's when you find out who you really are and how you grow I think*
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21 [Participant 11].
22

23
24 Accepting the process of life and being grateful for the positive experiences were also noted
25 by a few women as key factors in facilitating personal growth. Another participant suggested
26 that her life involved "*a lot of trial and error*", particularly during her early adult years. This
27 period was critical in the development of resourcefulness and although she viewed the coping
28 strategies developed as less than optimal, it created the platform for adjustment in later years.
29

30
31 The overarching sentiment flowing through the interviews however, revolved around
32 "*survivorship*". Despite whatever they had experienced, including abuse, significant loss, or
33 having "*nervous breakdowns*", the majority of women created meaning from these
34 experiences. This process allowed participants to come to terms with their experiences,
35 accept them as a part of life and get up 'off the floor' and keep moving forward:
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48 *I think I'm a survivor. I've, I have come through a very good marriage and a sad*
49 *marriage and I've lost my parents um and I've always moved forward, I've always*
50 *kept going forward it never occurred to me to give up and I think it's the genes I have*
51 *from my parents who were survivors as well* [Participant 7].
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DISCUSSION

Summary of findings

This study aimed to qualitatively explore aspects of coping with life stress in women with osteoarthritis. Coping strategies included cognitive (e.g. positive self-talk), help-seeking (e.g. social support and stressor education), faith-based and attitudinal (e.g. stoicism) practices. These practices were static and often developed early in life. Particularly, the persistence of attitudinal coping styles over time were detrimental to long-term adjustment, with significant reappraisal required in order to process stressful life events. The findings suggest that the adjustment to stress over the life course for participants was complex, with women describing a dualistic process involving both reduced resilience and personal growth. These findings add to the wider body of knowledge surrounding stress-coping and arthritis onset in women.

Coping with stress and coping with arthritis: two sides of the same coin?

The strategies used by women to minimise the immediate effects of life stress in the current study were found to be similar to those used to cope with an arthritis-related stressor.¹⁷ However, fewer life-stress coping strategies were identified. Life-stress coping strategies were heavily focused on cognitive (e.g. positive self-talk), and help-seeking (e.g. social support and stressor education). In contrast, previous research has found that women use a combination of strategies to cope with an arthritis-related stressor, including physical activity, distraction, activity restriction, pain minimisation, positive self-talk, prayer, social support and the repression of emotion. This is a novel finding, as previous qualitative research using samples with arthritis have viewed coping with stress as part of coping with arthritis¹⁶ and have not been able to provide an in-depth account of the subtle differences in coping with life stress as opposed to coping with an arthritis-related stressor.

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3 In contrast to Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping which posits
4 that coping is a dynamic process involving a transaction between the threat, the appraisal and
5 the response,⁹ coping with life stress by women in this study appeared to involve static
6 attitudinal coping processes that were developed early in life. This approach included
7 stoicism, in conjunction with more stressor-dependent cognitive and support-based coping
8 responses such as positive self-talk and help-seeking, as well as relaxing leisure activities
9 (e.g. reading). These results are partially supported by Tak¹⁶ and Iwasaki and Butcher.¹⁵ In
10 particular, Iwasaki and Butcher¹⁵ found that middle-aged and older women with arthritis
11 used spiritual-based coping, social support, physical activity, altruistic endeavours,
12 maintaining a positive attitude, and educational help-seeking practices in order to cope with
13 arthritis-related stress. However, Harris, et al.²⁰ recently found that educational help-seeking
14 practices were rarely employed when dealing with arthritis-associated stressors. Leisure
15 coping (or diversional) activities in particular have been found to have stress-buffering
16 effects³³ by reducing negative feelings towards the event and providing the capacity for
17 cognitive reframing to occur.³⁴ The use of a stoic attitude in order to cope with life stress
18 among women with arthritis, however, is unique to the current study and extends the concept
19 of coping involving emotion and problem-focused efforts.⁹ The findings add to the current
20 understanding surrounding coping with stress and highlight the detrimental long-term mental
21 and physical health effects of such coping practices. The expansion of quantitative coping
22 inventories beyond currently recognised problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches is
23 required. This may also have implications for coping with the effects of arthritis, such as
24 pain.

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53 Social support and help-seeking were found to be particularly important for the women in this
54 study. Some women sought support from a number of sources, while others were constrained
55 in their choices and chose to seek emotional support from outside the marital union. The
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3 expectation surrounding the source of support was pivotal to its efficacy, with women
4 resigned to accept gender stereotypical behaviours. In the absence of social support, the
5 women relied heavily on their own personal resources (e.g. cognitive approaches such as
6 distraction or stoicism) in order to cope. Hawkley and Cacioppo³⁵ provided evidence for the
7 role of social factors (particularly loneliness) in maintenance and reparative processes via
8 pro-inflammatory cytokine mediators (interleukin-1 β and tumor necrosis factor). Therefore,
9 women with osteoarthritis may benefit from extending their social support networks by
10 joining arthritis support groups in order to not only address arthritis-specific issues, but also
11 assist with coping with life stress.
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24 The employment of ingrained coping styles over the life course appeared to be detrimental to
25 long-term psychological adjustment to life stress in the current study and previous research,³⁶
26 with women describing a loss of resilience over time. Emotional repression, characteristic of
27 a stoic attitude, has been found to be associated with the reporting of low levels of distress
28 despite high levels of physiological reactivity.^{37,38} Diamond and colleagues³⁹ noted a
29 relationship between attachment style developed early in life and coping patterns.
30 Particularly, their findings demonstrated that attachment avoidance (i.e. a pattern of caregiver
31 attachment which is characterised by the minimisation and suppression of negative
32 emotions)^{40,41} was associated with a pattern of physiological stress reactivity characteristic of
33 repressive coping. As such, tasks that elicited negative thoughts and feelings were
34 accompanied by heightened and escalating sympathetic nervous system reactivity in the
35 absence of self-reported distress. This pattern was more pronounced in women. In the current
36 study, while stoicism appeared to be adaptive in the short-term by mitigating an emotional
37 response to the stressor, this was not representative of 'true' resilient (i.e. adaptive)
38 behaviour. Continually responding to stress with a stoic attitude may have increased the
39 physiological arousal associated with this passive style of coping and facilitated the onset of
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3 arthritis. While this finding requires further investigation at an epidemiological level, it may
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5 have implications for arthritis prevention.
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9 Moreover, for women in this study, changes to their coping approach were only made
10 following significant impact on either their emotional or physical health (including being
11 diagnosed with arthritis). Adopting a balanced or flexible coping approach may be the key to
12 long-term adjustment to stress.^{42,43} Interventions aimed at increasing emotional expression
13 and coping flexibility may be pertinent to the management of life stress in women with
14 osteoarthritis, particularly as women combat additional stressors associated with ageing and
15 disease management.
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19 The process of coping with stress over the life course appeared to be dualistic. While the
20 participants described experiencing a reduction in their ability to cope with ongoing life stress
21 over time, this was coupled with personal growth. Participants described implementing
22 cognitive reappraisal techniques that allowed them to see the silver lining in their
23 experiences. Life stress was viewed as character building and provided women with the
24 ability to cultivate or increase the depth of existing qualities such as empathy. The
25 development of greater empathy has been reported in studies involving other chronic
26 conditions.^{44,45} The notion of co-occurring positive and negative psychological states in
27 response to chronic stress is supported by Zautra.⁴⁶ It has been suggested that the ability to
28 find benefit in a negative experience assists the individual with reinstating valued beliefs
29 about themselves in relation to a world that is orderly, predictable, meaningful and
30 benevolent.⁴⁷ The struggles associated with coming to terms with life stress may have
31 provided the skills necessary to psychologically adjust to the physical changes associated
32 with arthritis. Alternatively, for these women, the diagnosis of, and increasing disability
33 associated with arthritis may have provided the impetus for the re-evaluation of pre-existing
34 schemas surrounding stress.⁴⁸ While this finding requires further investigation, it provides
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3 evidence for widening the scope in which to view stress and coping in arthritis and has
4 important clinical implications. Cognitive-behavioural stress management interventions
5 aimed at assisting in the reappraisal of stressful life events may not only facilitate
6 psychological well-being but also assist with the psychological adjustment to arthritis.
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8 Likewise, the mitigation of the adverse effects of stress in childhood and adolescence may
9 assist with arthritis prevention as coping patterns were shown to develop early and persist
10 over time.
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19 **Strengths and limitations**

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22 Trustworthiness of the research conducted in this study was evaluated according to the
23 criteria suggested by Kitto and colleagues⁴⁹ and was conducted in accordance with the
24 consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research.⁵⁰ Particularly, factors such as
25 purposefully sampling participants with arthritis, creating transparency at each stage of the
26 process (including a comprehensive description of the decisions and procedures involved in
27 the collection, recording and analysis of the data) as well as creating an 'audit trail' that may
28 be subject to external scrutiny contributed to the study's rigour. Added to this, a systematic
29 process was used in order to achieve data saturation.²⁵ Please note that although member
30 checking was considered as a method of increasing trustworthiness of the data by validating
31 the themes, interpretation and conclusions, there are inherent difficulties associated with the
32 use of this approach. Lillibridge and colleagues⁵¹ argue that experiences described during an
33 interview represent particular moments in time and revisiting these experiences can be
34 distressing and unwanted. Although the depth of the findings surrounding the stress appraisal
35 process in women with osteoarthritis is a particular strength of the study, it must be
36 considered in light of a few limitations. Firstly, this retrospective study focused on a sample
37 of women who had osteoarthritis as their primary diagnosis. The results may not be
38 generalisable to women with other rheumatic conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.
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3 Likewise, studies have shown gender differences in stress reactivity and approaches to
4 coping.^{52,53} These findings may not be generalisable to the coping practices of males with
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7 arthritis.
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10 **Conclusion**

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12 This qualitative study extends the foundational findings regarding perceived stress and
13 arthritis onset in women,²⁰ and adds to the current understanding of stress and coping in
14 arthritis. Coping with life stress appeared to involve both static attitudinal coping processes
15 developed early in life, coupled with stressor-dependent cognitive and support-based
16 responses. However, coping with life stress over the life course was complex, with women
17 describing a dualistic process involving both reduced resilience and personal growth. The
18 constant psychological readjustment over the long-term associated with these processes may
19 have contributed to deleterious physiological effects through increased arousal of stress
20 systems. The development of accurate quantitative measures in order to assess the complexity
21 involved in coping and adjustment are required to confirm the findings from this study at a
22 population level (including the expansion of coping inventories to encompass more
23 attitudinal-based coping). Further research is also required in order to better understand the
24 role of stoicism and the effects of emotional repression on arthritis outcomes, and its role in
25 the onset of chronic diseases more generally. Widespread public health campaigns aimed at
26 stress mitigation and the facilitation of adaptive coping mechanisms early in life may assist
27 with the prevention of arthritis in future generations of women.
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49 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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51 The research on which this paper is based was conducted as part of the Australian
52 Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, the University of Newcastle and the University of
53 Queensland. We are grateful to the Australian Government Department of Health for funding
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3 and to the women who provided the interview data. Researchers at the Research Centre for
4 Gender, Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle are members of the Hunter Medical
5 Research Institute (HMRI).
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10 **CONTRIBUTORS**

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13 MLH contributed to the study concept, study design, data analysis and interpretation, drafting
14 and editing of the manuscript as well as reviewing the manuscript for intellectual content. JB
15 and NT reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content. DL contributed to the study concept,
16 study design, supervision of the data analysis and review of the manuscript for intellectual
17 content. All authors approved the final version.
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24 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

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28 None declared.
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30 **PROVENANCE AND PEER REVIEW**

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33 Not Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.
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37 **DATA SHARING STATEMENT**

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40 No additional data are available.
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43 **OPEN ACCESS**

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Table 1. Participant characteristics

| | Missing n (%) | Frequency n (%) | Range | ^a M(SD) |
|---|------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Arthritis-related factors | | | | |
| Type of arthritis | | | | |
| Osteoarthritis only | | 16 (84.2%) | | |
| Osteoarthritis & inflammatory arthritis | | 3 (15.8%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| First reported arthritis diagnosis | | | | |
| Survey 3 (2001) | | 11 (57.9%) | | |
| Survey 4 (2004) | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Survey 5 (2007) | | 7 (36.8%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Demographics | | | | |
| ^b Age | | | | |
| Mean (SD) | | | 60.3 – 64.7 | 62.5 (1.3) |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Married/de facto | | 14 (73.7%) | | |
| Separated/divorced/widowed | | 4 (21.1%) | | |
| Never married | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Area of residence | | | | |
| Urban | | 6 (31.6%) | | |
| Rural/remote | | 13 (68.4%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0%) | | | |
| Educational attainment | | | | |
| Tertiary/post graduate | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Trade/diploma | | 6 (31.6%) | | |
| School/higher school certificate | | 7 (36.8%) | | |
| No formal education | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Missing | 2 (10.5%) | | | |
| Occupation | | | | |
| Highly skilled | | 4 (21.1%) | | |
| Skilled | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Less skilled | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| No employment | | 9 (47.4%) | | |
| Missing | 3 (15.8%) | | | |
| Country of birth | | | | |
| Australia | | 14 (73.7%) | | |
| Other English speaking | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Europe | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Asia | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |

^a means and standard deviations are reported.

^b age at the time of the interview.

Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ): 32-item checklist

Developed from:

Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*. 2007. Volume 19, Number 6: pp. 349 – 357

| No. Item | Guide questions/description | Reported on Page # |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity | | |
| <i>Personal Characteristics</i> | | |
| 1. Inter viewer/facilitator | Which author/s conducted the inter view or focus group? | 7 |
| 2. Credentials | What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD | 7 |
| 3. Occupation | What was their occupation at the time of the study? | 7 |
| 4. Gender | Was the researcher male or female? | 7 |
| 5. Experience and training | What experience or training did the researcher have? | 7 |
| <i>Relationship with participants</i> | | |
| 6. Relationship established | Was a relationship established prior to study commencement? | 6 |
| 7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer | What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research | N/A |
| 8. Interviewer characteristics | What characteristics were reported about the inter viewer/facilitator? e.g. Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic | 7 |
| Domain 2: study design | | |
| <i>Theoretical framework</i> | | |
| 9. Methodological orientation and Theory | What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis | 7-8 |
| <i>Participant selection</i> | | |
| 10. Sampling | How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball | 6 |
| 11. Method of approach | How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email | 6 |
| 12. Sample size | How many participants were in the study? | 9 |
| 13. Non-participation | How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons? | 9 |

| | | |
|--|---|-------|
| <i>Setting</i> | | |
| 14. Setting of data collection | Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace | 7 |
| 15. Presence of non-participants | Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers? | N/A |
| 16. Description of sample | What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date | 9 |
| <i>Data collection</i> | | |
| 17. Interview guide | Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested? | 7 |
| 18. Repeat interviews | Were repeat inter views carried out? If yes, how many? | N/A |
| 19. Audio/visual recording | Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data? | 7 |
| 20. Field notes | Were field notes made during and/or after the inter view or focus group? | 7 |
| 21. Duration | What was the duration of the inter views or focus group? | 7 |
| 22. Data saturation | Was data saturation discussed? | 8 |
| 23. Transcripts returned | Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction? | N/A |
| Domain 3: analysis and findings | | |
| <i>Data analysis</i> | | |
| 24. Number of data coders | How many data coders coded the data? | 8 |
| 25. Description of the coding tree | Did authors provide a description of the coding tree? | N/A |
| 26. Derivation of themes | Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data? | 8 |
| 27. Software | What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data? | 8 |
| 28. Participant checking | Did participants provide feedback on the findings? | 21 |
| <i>Reporting</i> | | |
| 29. Quotations presented | Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number | 8 |
| 30. Data and findings consistent | Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings? | 17-22 |
| 31. Clarity of major themes | Were major themes clearly presented in the findings? | 10-16 |
| 32. Clarity of minor themes | Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes? | 12 |

BMJ Open

Perceptions of coping with non-disease related life stress for women with osteoarthritis: a qualitative analysis

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|---------------------------------|--|
| Journal: | <i>BMJ Open</i> |
| Manuscript ID | bmjopen-2015-010630.R1 |
| Article Type: | Research |
| Date Submitted by the Author: | 04-Mar-2016 |
| Complete List of Authors: | Harris, Melissa; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing Byles, Julie; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing Townsend, Natalie; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing Loxton, Deborah; University of Newcastle, Research Centre for Gender Health & Ageing |
| Primary Subject Heading: | Qualitative research |
| Secondary Subject Heading: | Rheumatology |
| Keywords: | psychological stress, coping, osteoarthritis, women, ageing, emotional repression |
| | |

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3 ***Perceptions of coping with non-disease related life stress for women***
4 ***with osteoarthritis: a qualitative analysis***
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ABSTRACT

Objective: Coping with arthritis-related stress has been extensively studied. However, limited evidence exists regarding coping with stress extraneous to the disease (life stress). This study explored life stress and coping in a subset of older women with osteoarthritis from a larger longitudinal study.

Setting: An Australian regional University.

Design: This qualitative study involved semi-structured telephone interviews. Potential participants were mailed a letter of invitation/participant information statement by the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH). Invitations were sent out in small batches (primarily ten). Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved using a systematic process (n=19). Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Data were thematically analysed.

Participants: Women who indicated being diagnosed or treated for arthritis in the previous three years in the fifth survey of the ALSWH (conducted in 2007) provided the sampling frame. Potential participants were randomly sampled by a blinded data manager using a random number generator.

Results: Coping with life stress involved both attitudinal coping processes developed early in life (i.e. stoicism) and transient cognitive and support-based responses. Women also described a dualistic process involving a reduction in the ability to cope with ongoing stress over time, coupled with personal growth.

Conclusions: This is the first study to examine how individuals cope with non-arthritis related stress. The findings add to the current understanding of stress and coping, and have implications regarding the prevention of arthritis in women. Importantly, this study highlighted the potential detrimental impact of persistent coping patterns developed early in

1
2
3 life. Public health campaigns aimed at stress mitigation and facilitation of adaptive coping
4
5 mechanisms in childhood and adolescence may assist with arthritis prevention.
6

7 **Keywords:** psychological stress, coping, osteoarthritis, women, ageing
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9

10 11 **Strengths and limitations of this study** 12

- 13 • This is the first study to examine how women with osteoarthritis cope with non-
14 arthritis related stress
15
- 16 • Although women with osteoarthritis used somewhat similar approaches to coping
17 with life stress as has been reported for arthritis-related stress, fewer life-stress coping
18 strategies were identified. Life-stress coping strategies were focused on cognitive and
19 help-seeking approaches, with a strong reliance on stoicism (developed early in life).
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- 21 • This study focused on retrospective accounts of coping with life stress using a sample
22 of women who had osteoarthritis as their primary diagnosis. The results may not be
23 generalisable to women with other rheumatic conditions or males with osteoarthritis.
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INTRODUCTION

Considerable interest has been generated around understanding the role of psychosocial factors in influencing disease trajectories. In particular, research has increasingly highlighted the role of psychological stress in the aetiology and progression of chronic disease.¹⁻³ The role of psychological stress in the onset and course of disease has been highlighted as particularly pertinent for women, with research suggesting that women are exposed to a greater number of life stressors and have a tendency to perceive stressors as more stressful than men.⁴ Arthritis in particular has been found to be a major cause of disability, limited mobility, and chronic pain in women.⁵ The majority of stress-related research has focused on the occurrence of chronic major and minor life events.⁶⁻⁸ However, the way in which individuals perceive stress, coupled with the coping strategies employed to reduce the impact of stress, have been found to be more important than the exposure to a stressor.⁹

Studies have consistently demonstrated that coping strategies employed by an individual in response to a stressful event have a significant impact on psychological as well as physical outcomes.¹⁰⁻¹² In terms of coping with arthritis, passive or emotion-focused coping has been found to be associated with increased arthritis pain, disability and depression in comparison to those who employ active (problem-based) coping strategies.^{10,13,14} Meanwhile, a qualitative study of Canadian adults involved in a self-management program (aged 45-78), found that stress was the *'biggest factor'* in their lives. Coping involved *'just getting through the day'* or participating in leisure-time activities in order to achieve *'enjoyment'* or *'balance'*.¹⁵ On the other hand, Tak¹⁶ identified cognitive, behavioural or social diversion-based activities and assertive actions (e.g. directly addressing the problem by seeking a solution or talking to someone) were found to reduce the effects of stress in those with arthritis. More recently, psychological adjustment to arthritis over time was found to be attributed primarily to cognitive and attitudinal factors including stoicism and making downward comparisons.¹⁷

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3 Importantly, coping with arthritis was viewed as a dynamic ‘day to day’ process involving a
4 constant struggle between grieving physical losses and increasing dependence amidst
5 symptom management.
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10 While a large body of evidence exists regarding arthritis-specific coping strategies,^{18,19}
11 limited evidence exists regarding coping with stress extraneous to arthritis (i.e. life stress).
12
13 Harris and colleagues²⁰ recently demonstrated in a longitudinal cohort study that perceived
14 stress is a critical modifiable risk factor for arthritis onset in older women. Women
15 chronically experiencing high stress levels had a 2.4-fold increase in developing arthritis
16 compared to women who experienced no stress. Understanding women’s coping patterns
17 (including their origin) may assist in further elucidating the stress-chronic disease
18 relationship. Studies focused on understanding this concept are currently lacking. It is
19 important to understand whether women with arthritis cope with life stress differently to how
20 they cope with arthritis-related stress. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore non-
21 disease related stress-coping processing in a sub-sample of women with arthritis. With the
22 majority of arthritis diagnoses driven by osteoarthritis, the experiences of women with
23 osteoarthritis formed the focus of this study. A qualitative approach was applied in order to
24 capture the complexities surrounding cognitive appraisal.²¹
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42 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

43 **Ethical approval**

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46 Ethical approval was granted for all aspects of the project by the University of Newcastle’s
47 Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection, with all
48 interviews and verbal consent procedures carried out in accordance with the University of
49 Newcastle’s Human Research Ethics Committee policies regarding telephone interviewing.
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Participant sampling frame

Participants were sampled from the 1946-1951 cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH).^{22,23} Women who indicated being diagnosed or treated for arthritis at survey 5 (conducted in 2007) and meeting the inclusion criteria (i.e. fluent in English, did not have a proxy (e.g. carer) complete their surveys, or had not withdrawn from either the longitudinal study or further sub-studies) were included in the sampling frame (n=2,802). Potential participants were then randomly selected from the remaining pool by a blinded data manager using a random number generator. A sample of 60 women meeting the inclusion criteria was initially drawn, assuming a 50% response rate. Women however, were sampled until data saturation had been reached. Key demographic and health-related factors such as education, area of residence, Body Mass Index, physical activity and health-related quality of life were monitored throughout the recruitment process in order to achieve a diverse sample.

Recruitment process

Potential participants randomly selected from the study participant pool were mailed a letter of invitation/participant information statement by the ALSWH. Invitations were sent out in small batches (primarily ten). Potential participants were contacted by the research team (MLH) two to four weeks following the mailout in order to gain informed consent.

Interview process

The interview process has been described in detail elsewhere.¹⁷ Briefly, to ensure consistency in data collection, the semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author (MLH), a PhD candidate with a background in psychology and post graduate training in qualitative research (who had no personal experience of osteoarthritis and was not in the sampled age

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3 bracket). All semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted at the offices of the
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5 Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing located at the University of Newcastle and
6
7 digitally recorded. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, participants provided verbal
8
9 consent. The provision of informed verbal consent was more appropriate to written consent to
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11 reduce participant burden. While interviews were primarily guided by the interview schedule,
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13 participants were able to direct the conversation and concentrate on issues they felt were most
14
15 important. During (and after) the interview, field notes were collected. These included points
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17 of interest to follow-up, the emotional condition of the participant, impressions of the
18
19 interview and a summary of significant findings. Interviews ranged in duration from 15
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21 minutes to 2 hours 50 minutes, with an average time of 1 hour 10 minutes.
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26 **Semi-structured interview schedule**

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29 The semi-structured interview was retrospective in nature. Interview questions were designed
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31 to guide women to reflect upon their life experiences (i.e. stressors) and coping mechanisms
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33 across the life course (including during their childhood and early adult years, at the time of
34
35 arthritis diagnosis and post-diagnosis). Consistent with a realist-orientated approach (i.e.
36
37 aiming to explain the phenomenon with a degree of objectivity),²⁴ the main interview
38
39 questions were open-ended. This provided an environment for the participant to tell their
40
41 story without direction from the interviewer. While the main questions provided a certain
42
43 amount of structure in order to conduct the interview, they were not prescriptive. To provide
44
45 the contextual material necessary to understand the phenomenon, the content of the interview
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47 was ultimately co-determined by both the researcher and participant.
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51 **Data analysis**

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55 Women were sampled until 'data saturation' had been reached using a systematic process
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57 similar to Francis and colleagues²⁵ which recommended an *a priori* sample size of ten be set,
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3 and a stopping criterion of three for structured interviews. Due to the diverse nature of the
4 interview schedule and semi-structured approach, an initial sample size of 15 was established,
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6
7 with a stopping criterion of three. The stopping criterion was employed in order to determine
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9
10 the point when no more themes (or sub-themes) were identified in the data. The stopping
11
12 criterion was tested after each successive interview. At the point when three successive
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14 interviews had been analysed without further thematic identification, data saturation was said
15
16 to be achieved. As the final two interviews were carried out in succession, this criterion was
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18 exceeded by one.
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21 Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. All interview
22
23 transcripts were checked for accuracy (MLH) and the data were entered into the qualitative
24
25 management program Nvivo v.9 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2010) for analysis. Thematic
26
27 analysis was applied to the data, with data coded by the first author (MLH) following the
28
29 procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke.²⁶ Briefly, finalised transcripts were systematically
30
31 read and re-read prior to thematic coding to obtain an overall sense of the data,²⁷ with
32
33 patterns and meanings identified. Phase two involved generating initial codes from the raw
34
35 data. Transcripts were read in a line by line fashion, giving equal attention to each data item
36
37 within the dataset, with sections of text relevant to the research entered into Nvivo as free
38
39 standing 'nodes' (i.e. categories). Throughout the coding process, all transcripts were
40
41 repeatedly reviewed and analysed. Similarities and differences were constantly compared to
42
43 each other in an iterative fashion, with similar phenomena (or similar aspects of a
44
45 phenomenon) grouped together. Comparisons were made within and across transcripts.²⁸ The
46
47 refinement of higher order concepts (i.e. themes) involved ensuring that the generated codes
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49 formed coherent patterns within and across the datasets with disconfirming, as well as
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51 confirming evidence sought.²⁹⁻³¹ The first author reviewed and discussed the content of the
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3 identified themes and example extracts on multiple occasions with the senior author (DL) to
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5 ensure that the themes accurately reflected the participants' narratives.
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7

8 **Additional participant information**

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10 The following demographic variables (described in detail by Harris and colleagues^{20,32}) were
11
12 used to provide participant characteristics: age, marital status, highest educational
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14 qualification, occupation, area of residence and country of birth.
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18 **RESULTS**

19 **Participant characteristics**

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22 Nineteen women (out of 44 invited to take part) with an average age of 62.5 ± 1.3 years at the
23
24 time of the interviews participated in the interviews. All women had osteoarthritis as their
25
26 primary diagnosis, with three women reporting rheumatic comorbidity. Participants had been
27
28 diagnosed more than four years prior to the interview, with the majority ($n=11/19$) first
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30 reporting their diagnosis at survey 3 (conducted in 2001). Additional sociodemographic
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32 characteristics are shown in Table 1.
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39 **Summary of themes**

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42 Women with osteoarthritis described experiencing stress and adversity at some point
43
44 throughout their lives. For some women, these experiences were intermittent, while for others
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46 they began early in life and accumulated across the life course. Although three women
47
48 reported experiencing reasonably happy childhoods with “*no major dramas*”, a number of
49
50 women reported significant stress prior to arthritis onset, particularly from an early age.
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52 These events were often described as being ‘traumatic’ by the participants and primarily
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54 revolved around the illness or death of a parent, poverty, as well as experiencing physical or
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56 sexual abuse. However, coping with life stress over time was found to be complex. Coping
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3 has been identified as important in the mitigation of the stress response and facilitation of
4 psychological adjustment following stress exposure. The following provides a discussion
5 surrounding the specific coping strategies employed by participants in dealing with life stress
6 (as opposed to coping with arthritis symptoms and limitations), the patterns of coping that
7 emerged over time, and factors that influenced psychological adjustment to life stress.
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14 **Theme 1: Approaches to coping with stress**

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18 Women with osteoarthritis identified a number of strategies for minimising the immediate
19 effects of life stress. These women appeared to be able to compartmentalise certain strategies
20 for coping with arthritis and coping with non-arthritis stress. For instance, health behavioural
21 approaches such as physical activity emerged as a key factor in coping with pain (i.e. “*use it*
22 *or lose it*” philosophy), they were rarely reported by the women in terms of coping with
23 stress over the life course. Participants most often reported utilising either help-seeking
24 practices, cognitive-based coping or drew upon personal belief systems and attitudes in order
25 to deal with life stress.
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35 Help-seeking and support-based approaches

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39 Eighteen women reported that seeking support from others was particularly important as a
40 means of coping with life stress. While some women sought emotional support from a variety
41 of sources, other women described being more constrained in their choices. For women who
42 valued this coping approach and had difficult or generationally stereotypical relationships
43 with their spouses (i.e. where emotional expression and empathy were not core features of the
44 relationship) “*he would no sooner talk about his feelings than fly to the moon*” [Participant
45 5], this involved seeking informal support from individuals outside the marital union.
46 Children, siblings, friends or other women “*full of wisdom*” within the community were
47 identified as key sources:
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3 *there are inspirational women out there. They have been through the black hole, you*
4 *know through that tunnel of life, there is nothing they haven't been through you know*
5 *between you know ill children, dying children, gay children, whatever children,*
6 *divorces ... [Participant 11]*
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12 In contrast to generational stereotypes, a number of women also spoke about receiving
13 professional help regarding their problems and sought counsel from psychologists,
14 psychiatrists, grief counsellors, general practitioners or other alternative and complementary
15 health practitioners as well as attending self-development courses. Seeking help from others
16 facilitated an emotional release, a factor that was seen as pivotal to the maintenance of good
17 mental health:
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27 *I think the main thing is to be able to talk about it ... You know some people sort of,*
28 *they clam up and they don't talk about it, well they're the ones that really have the*
29 *breakdowns aren't they? [Participant 9].*
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34 A few women also used 'information seeking' practices in order to reduce the impact of a
35 stressor. This was particularly useful when the stressor related to the illness of a spouse or
36 family member. For one participant whose husband was possibly in the early stages of
37 Alzheimer's disease, the ability to source information from the internet was viewed as a
38 "God send" for her and others that live in "less developed parts of the countryside". For her,
39 having information readily available either dispelled concerns regarding the source of stress
40 or provided a sense of control over the situation in which plans to combat the issue could be
41 outlined. Being educated about the source of stress was also supported by other participants,
42 "the more you know, it does stop you worrying" [Participant 12].
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Cognitive approaches

Women often spoke about using cognitive approaches to modify their thoughts surrounding life stressors. These practices included mind blocking strategies or distraction in order “*to not dwell on all th[e] kind of crap that happens*” and “*put [the stress] back where it belongs*” [Participant 11]. Activities that provided distraction included reading, watching television, listening to music, bird watching, paid work, playing with a pet and being involved in craft activities. These activities were reported to have a calming effect and facilitated relaxation. Women also employed positive self-talk, although to a lesser extent. These techniques allowed for the participant to either minimise or discount the stress they were experiencing:

sometimes you know you can be feeling down and, and you’ve, and you have to say to yourself well come on it’s in your mind, ... it’s not as bad as you think it is. It’s just the way you’re feeling ... [Participant 5].

Other cognitive processes (paralleling arthritis-specific coping efforts) included the use of comparative coping (i.e. comparing their stress with others) in order to normalise stress:

I’ve been divorced once um infertile for a lot of years ... lost a baby at three days old, my husband had um a stage two melanoma and then bowel cancer and just the usual problems ... normal life when you think of it compared to most other people [Participant 13].

Faith-based approaches

Religious or faith-based coping was identified by one-third of women as important to coping with stress, “*...even though I’m not a church goer now I still have very strong faith and I do think that ... has helped me right through life face things*” [Participant 5]. This type of coping not only related to formal prayer and belief in Christianity, but also included engagement in

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3 meditation in order to promote emotional expression. Formal prayer methods were often used
4
5 by participants when other coping strategies had been exhausted and the participant could no
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7 longer carry the burden, “*when I feel like it’s getting too heavy and I can’t carry it anymore*
8
9 *that’s when I hand it over [to God] ...*” [Participant 19].
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11

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13 Stoicism

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15 Being stoic and repressing (or denying) emotions was consistently chosen as an attitudinal-
16
17 based coping strategy by the participants (n=15). This type of coping was particularly noted
18
19 in response to traumatic stress or the compounding of life events:
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21

22
23 *my mother took us kids and we left my father in I suppose I was about seven or eight*
24
25 *um ... and we sort of soldiered on on our own, and then um I met my late husband ...*
26
27 *We had 28 years, three children, he passed away, then I met my current husband and*
28
29 *here we are ... things like that they make you bottle it up* [Participant 3].
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33 In response to dealing with her daughter and husband having cancer at the same time, one
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35 participant commented “... *that’s the sort of person I am I just cope. You have to do it and I*
36
37 *had to be there for her because there was no one else and you just do it*” [Participant 18].
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40 Other women provided a similar analysis of the stress they experienced often simply
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42 suggesting that “*I just had to get on with it, there was no time to dwell on things*” [Participant
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44 4].
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46 47 **Theme 2: Origins of coping responses**

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49 Although the participants reported coping with life stress through either cognitive, help-
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51 seeking, attitudinal or faith-based practices, throughout the course of the interviews distinct
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53 patterns regarding the ways in which women with osteoarthritis approached life stress over
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55 time emerged. Coping responses particularly during times of intense stress were often a result
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3 of unconscious mechanisms that emerged early in life (n=14). The women often indicated
4 that the ability to cope was either an intrinsic quality (i.e. being born like that), a result of a
5 “*survival*” mechanism or the influence of parent-driven coping characteristics taken on at an
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10 early age, “*we were brought up to be strong*” [Participant 10]. One participant in particular
11 noted that having been brought up by a single mother she learned to “*just get on with*
12
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14 *things*”:

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16
17 *Well we got taught when we were quite young ‘cause mum had to bring the two of us*
18
19 *up on her own to you know you’ve got to just get on with life no matter what happens*
20
21 *to you you’ve got to just pick yourself up and get on with things. You don’t dwell on*
22
23 *things or else you’ll go under* [Participant 2].
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26
27 Women with osteoarthritis appeared to repeatedly choose coping mechanisms developed in
28 childhood across the life course and often modelled their “*very strong sort of character*” on a
29 significant caregiver. For one participant, the ability to “*soldier on*” [Participant 19] in the
30 face of stress was described as an admirable and necessary quality that she modelled from her
31 mother. Another participant applied the coping responses learned during childhood to coping
32 with having her daughter and husband diagnosed with cancer at the same time:
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41 *my mother was a very strong person. I think she had to be to get through our*
42
43 *childhood ... she had quite a few setbacks in her life but I think that’s where I get it*
44
45 *from. I am a lot like her ...* [Participant 18].
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48 Thus, coping with early experiences had long-term implications, shaping the way in which
49 the women approached not only future stressful life experiences, but their view of life in
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60 general.

Theme 3: Changes in coping with life stress over time

Coping responses employed by the participants were often developed early in life and persisted across the life course. Consistently coping with psychosocial stressors using the same strategies, although adaptive in the short-term, were described as being detrimental to both physical and mental health over the long-term. The persistent use of attitudinal-based coping resources such as the stoic “*just get on with it*” approach were reported to coincide with a reduced ability to cope with ongoing stress. This process was often described by participants as a “*loss of resilience*”. For the majority of participants, new coping strategies were sought only when strategies used in the past began to fail. For some participants, the quest for new and effective coping strategies was a difficult process. As one participant indicated “*I think I’ve lost some of my ability to manage my stress and I haven’t found ... something that works*” [Participant 10].

The majority of women described having barrelled through life where the burden of responsibility and expectations associated with being a woman allowed participants to get through difficult and often traumatic times

When you are so busy ... you don’t become stressed because you don’t have time to think about it. You don’t have time to worry you, you’re only concern is oh my God I’ve got three kids at home, I’ve still got to put a meal on the table for them ...
[Participant 13].

Over time, however, this method of coping was ineffective and detrimental to both their physical and mental health. A lack of time promoted the use of survival coping, with the effects of this process only evident once chronic stressors were removed. This self-sacrificing mentality facilitated some women remaining in stressful situations despite their own needs and health, “*I guess I just pressed on regardless of my own health needs*” [Participant 4].

Theme 4: Surviving life stress

Coping with stress over time ultimately appeared to be dualistic in nature. While the majority of women reported experiencing psychosocial stress over the life course, a number of women described an ability to see the ‘silver lining’ in their experiences. This process of ‘stress-related growth’ was vital to long-term psychological adjustment. This theme describes the factors participants perceived as important in the reappraisal of life stress over time. Stressful experiences were viewed by participants as character building, assisting in the cultivation of empathy for others, *“it just made me more caring for other people and gave me more empathy I do think”* [Participant 14] and presented a learning experience. For instance:

I think you don't know what's in you until you are solely tested, that's what I tell my kids, we don't know what strengths we have and it's easy when you're cruising along but that's when you find out who you really are and how you grow I think [Participant 11].

Accepting the process of life and being grateful for the positive experiences were also noted by a few women as key factors in facilitating personal growth. Another participant suggested that her life involved *“a lot of trial and error”*, particularly during her early adult years. This period was critical in the development of resourcefulness and although she viewed the coping strategies developed as less than optimal, it created the platform for adjustment in later years.

The overarching sentiment flowing through the interviews however, revolved around *“survivorship”*. Despite whatever they had experienced, including abuse, significant loss, or having *“nervous breakdowns”*, the majority of women created meaning from these experiences. This process allowed participants to come to terms with their experiences, accept them as a part of life and get up ‘off the floor’ and keep moving forward:

1
2
3 *I think I'm a survivor. I've, I have come through a very good marriage and a sad*
4 *marriage and I've lost my parents um and I've always moved forward, I've always*
5 *kept going forward it never occurred to me to give up and I think it's the genes I have*
6 *from my parents who were survivors as well [Participant 7].*
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12 **DISCUSSION**

13 **Summary of findings**

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19 This study aimed to qualitatively explore aspects of coping with life stress in women with
20 osteoarthritis. Coping strategies included cognitive (e.g. positive self-talk), help-seeking (e.g.
21 social support and stressor education), faith-based and attitudinal (e.g. stoicism) practices.
22
23 Survival coping practices were often developed early in life. Particularly, the persistence of
24 attitudinal coping styles over time were detrimental to long-term adjustment, with significant
25 reappraisal required in order to process stressful life events. The findings suggest that the
26 adjustment to stress over the life course for participants was complex, with women describing
27 a dualistic process involving both reduced resilience and personal growth. These findings add
28 to the wider body of knowledge surrounding stress-coping and arthritis onset in women.
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39 **Coping with stress and coping with arthritis: two sides of the same coin?**

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42 Although the strategies used by women to minimise the immediate effects of life stress in the
43 current study were found to be somewhat similar to those they used to cope with an arthritis-
44 related stressor,¹⁷ fewer life-stress coping strategies were identified. Life-stress coping
45 strategies were heavily focused on cognitive (e.g. positive self-talk) approaches, and help-
46 seeking (e.g. social support and stressor education). In contrast, we previously found that
47 women use a combination of strategies to cope with an arthritis-related stressor, including
48 physical activity, distraction, activity restriction, pain minimisation, positive self-talk, prayer,
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3 social support and the repression of emotion. This is a novel finding, as previous qualitative
4 research using samples with arthritis have viewed coping with stress as part of coping with
5 arthritis¹⁶ and have not been able to provide an in-depth account of the subtle differences in
6 coping with life stress, as opposed to coping with an arthritis-related stressor.
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12 In contrast to Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping which posits
13 that coping is a dynamic process involving a transaction between the threat, the appraisal and
14 the response,⁹ coping with life stress by women in this study appeared to involve attitudinal
15 coping processes that were developed early in life. This approach included stoicism, in
16 conjunction with more stressor-dependent cognitive and support-based coping responses such
17 as positive self-talk and help-seeking, as well as relaxing leisure activities (e.g. reading).
18 These results are partially supported by Tak¹⁶ and Iwasaki and Butcher.¹⁵ In particular,
19 Iwasaki and Butcher¹⁵ found that middle-aged and older women with arthritis used spiritual-
20 based coping, social support, physical activity, altruistic endeavours, maintaining a positive
21 attitude, and educational help-seeking practices in order to cope with arthritis-related stress.
22 However, Harris et al.¹⁷ recently found that educational help-seeking practices were rarely
23 employed when dealing with arthritis-associated stressors. Leisure coping (or diversional)
24 activities in particular have been found to have stress-buffering effects³³ by reducing negative
25 feelings towards the event and providing the capacity for cognitive reframing to occur.³⁴ The
26 use of a stoic attitude in order to cope with life stress among women with arthritis, however,
27 is unique to the current study and extends the concept of coping involving emotion and
28 problem-focused efforts.⁹ The findings add to the current understanding surrounding coping
29 with stress and highlight the potential detrimental long-term mental and physical health
30 effects of such coping practices (however this hypothesis would have to be examined in
31 future studies). The expansion of quantitative coping inventories beyond currently recognised
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3 problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches is required. This may also have
4
5 implications for coping with the effects of arthritis, such as pain.
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9 Social support and help-seeking were found to be particularly important for the women in this
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11 study. Some women sought support from a number of sources, while others were constrained
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13 in their choices and chose to seek emotional support from outside the marital union. The
14
15 expectation surrounding the source of support was pivotal to its efficacy, with women
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17 resigned to accept gender stereotypical behaviours. In the absence of social support, the
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19 women relied heavily on their own personal resources (e.g. cognitive approaches such as
20
21 distraction or stoicism) in order to cope. Hawkley and Cacioppo³⁵ provided evidence for the
22
23 role of social factors (particularly loneliness) in maintenance and reparative processes via
24
25 pro-inflammatory cytokine mediators (interleukin-1 β and tumor necrosis factor). Therefore,
26
27 women with osteoarthritis may benefit from extending their social support networks by
28
29 joining arthritis support groups in order to not only address arthritis-specific issues, but also
30
31 assist with coping with life stress.
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36 The employment of ingrained coping styles over the life course appeared to be detrimental to
37
38 long-term psychological adjustment to life stress in the current study and previous research,³⁶
39
40 with women describing a loss of resilience over time. Emotional repression, characteristic of
41
42 a stoic attitude, has been found to be associated with the reporting of low levels of distress
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44 despite high levels of physiological reactivity.^{37,38} Diamond and colleagues³⁹ noted a
45
46 relationship between attachment style developed early in life and coping patterns.
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48 Particularly, their findings demonstrated that attachment avoidance (i.e. a pattern of caregiver
49
50 attachment which is characterised by the minimisation and suppression of negative
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52 emotions)^{40,41} was associated with a pattern of physiological stress reactivity characteristic of
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54 repressive coping. As such, tasks that elicited negative thoughts and feelings were
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56 accompanied by heightened and escalating sympathetic nervous system reactivity in the
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3 absence of self-reported distress. This pattern was more pronounced in women. In the current
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5 study, while stoicism appeared to be adaptive in the short-term by mitigating an emotional
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7 response to the stressor, this was not representative of 'true' resilient (i.e. adaptive)
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9 behaviour. Continually responding to stress with a stoic attitude may increase the
10
11 physiological arousal associated with this passive style of coping and facilitated the onset of
12
13 arthritis. While this finding requires further investigation at an epidemiological level (as it
14
15 was not a specific aim of the study), it may have implications for arthritis prevention.
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19 Moreover, for women in this study, changes to their coping approach were only made
20
21 following significant impact on either their emotional or physical health (including being
22
23 diagnosed with arthritis). Adopting a balanced or flexible coping approach may be the key to
24
25 long-term adjustment to stress.^{42,43} Interventions aimed at increasing emotional expression
26
27 and coping flexibility may be pertinent to the management of life stress in women with
28
29 osteoarthritis, particularly as women combat additional stressors associated with ageing and
30
31 disease management.
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35 The process of coping with stress over the life course appeared to be dualistic. While the
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37 participants described experiencing a reduction in their ability to cope with ongoing life stress
38
39 over time, this was coupled with personal growth. Participants described implementing
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41 cognitive reappraisal techniques that allowed them to see the silver lining in their
42
43 experiences. Life stress was viewed as character building and provided women with the
44
45 ability to cultivate or increase the depth of existing qualities such as empathy. The
46
47 development of greater empathy has been reported in studies involving other chronic
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49 conditions.^{44,45} The notion of co-occurring positive and negative psychological states in
50
51 response to chronic stress is supported by Zautra.⁴⁶ It has been suggested that the ability to
52
53 find benefit in a negative experience assists the individual with reinstating valued beliefs
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55 about themselves in relation to a world that is orderly, predictable, meaningful and
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3 benevolent.⁴⁷ The struggles associated with coming to terms with life stress may have
4 provided the skills necessary to psychologically adjust to the physical changes associated
5 with arthritis. Alternatively, for these women, the diagnosis of, and increasing disability
6 associated with arthritis may have provided the impetus for the re-evaluation of pre-existing
7 schemas surrounding stress.⁴⁸ While this interpretation requires further investigation, it
8 provides evidence for widening the scope in which to view stress and coping in arthritis and
9 has important clinical implications. Cognitive-behavioural stress management interventions
10 aimed at assisting in the reappraisal of stressful life events may not only facilitate
11 psychological well-being but also assist with the psychological adjustment to arthritis.
12 Likewise, with resilience found to be a malleable and teachable construct,⁴⁹ improving
13 resilience in childhood and adolescence may assist with arthritis prevention considering
14 coping patterns were shown to develop early and persist over time. Importantly, fostering
15 qualities such as optimism and positive mood, self-esteem, self-care, independence, social
16 support, and reduced anxiety, have been found to influence health, including biological
17 processes such as neuroendocrine and immune function.⁵⁰

37 **Strengths and limitations**

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40 Trustworthiness of the research conducted in this study was evaluated according to the
41 criteria suggested by Kitto and colleagues⁵¹ and was conducted in accordance with the
42 consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research.⁵² Particularly, factors such as
43 purposefully sampling participants with arthritis, creating transparency at each stage of the
44 process (including a comprehensive description of the decisions and procedures involved in
45 the collection, recording and analysis of the data) as well as creating an 'audit trail' that may
46 be subject to external scrutiny contributed to the study's rigour. Added to this, a systematic
47 process was used in order to achieve data saturation.²⁵ Please note that although member
48 checking was considered as a method of increasing trustworthiness of the data by validating
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3 the themes, interpretation and conclusions, there are inherent difficulties associated with the
4 use of this approach. Lillibridge and colleagues⁵³ argue that experiences described during an
5 interview represent particular moments in time and revisiting these experiences can be
6 distressing and unwanted.
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12 Although the depth of the findings surrounding the stress appraisal process in women with
13 osteoarthritis is a particular strength of the study, it must be considered in light of a few
14 limitations. Firstly, this retrospective study focused on a sample of women who had
15 osteoarthritis as their primary diagnosis. There are also potential issues surrounding the
16 retrospective recall of life events. However, it has been found that more salient life events
17 (i.e. personally significant), are reported more consistently.⁵⁴ Additionally, the results may
18 not be generalisable to women with other rheumatic conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis
19 or women from other generations (particularly those who are younger). As there was an over-
20 representation from women living in rural areas, it is important to note that some of the
21 coping practices (e.g. help-seeking via the internet or a focus on intrinsic coping strategies)
22 may be specifically related to geographical isolation. Moreover, studies have shown gender
23 differences in stress reactivity and approaches to coping.^{55,56} These findings may not be
24 generalisable to the coping practices of males with arthritis.
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42 **Conclusion**

43
44 This qualitative study extends the foundational findings regarding perceived stress and
45 arthritis onset in women,²⁰ and adds to the current understanding of stress and coping in
46 arthritis. Coping with life stress appeared to involve both attitudinal coping processes
47 developed early in life, coupled with stressor-dependent cognitive and support-based
48 responses. However, coping with life stress over the life course was complex, with women
49 describing a dualistic process involving both reduced resilience and personal growth. The
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3 constant psychological readjustment over the long-term associated with these processes may
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5 have contributed to deleterious physiological effects through increased arousal of stress
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7 systems. The development of accurate quantitative measures in order to assess the complexity
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9 involved in coping and adjustment are required to confirm the findings from this study at a
10
11 population level (including the expansion of coping inventories to encompass more
12
13 attitudinal-based coping). Further research is also required in order to better understand the
14
15 role of stoicism and the effects of emotional repression on arthritis, and its role in the onset of
16
17 chronic diseases more generally. Widespread public health campaigns and psychological
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19 interventions aimed at stress mitigation and the facilitation of adaptive coping mechanisms
20
21 early in life may be one potentially important approach in assisting with the prevention of
22
23 arthritis in future generations of women.
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27 28 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** 29

30
31 The research on which this paper is based was conducted as part of the Australian
32
33 Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, the University of Newcastle and the University of
34
35 Queensland. We are grateful to the Australian Government Department of Health for funding
36
37 and to the women who provided the interview data. Researchers at the Research Centre for
38
39 Generational Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle are members of the Hunter
40
41 Medical Research Institute (HMRI).
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45 46 **CONTRIBUTORS** 47

48
49 MLH contributed to the study concept, study design, data analysis and interpretation, drafting
50
51 and editing of the manuscript as well as reviewing the manuscript for intellectual content. JB
52
53 and NT reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content. DL contributed to the study concept,
54
55 study design, supervision of the data analysis and review of the manuscript for intellectual
56
57 content. All authors approved the final version.
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COMPETING INTERESTS

None declared.

PROVENANCE AND PEER REVIEW

Not Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

DATA SHARING STATEMENT

No additional data are available.

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Table 1. Participant characteristics

| | Missing n (%) | Frequency n (%) | Range | ^a M(SD) |
|---|------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Arthritis-related factors | | | | |
| Type of arthritis | | | | |
| Osteoarthritis only | | 16 (84.2%) | | |
| Osteoarthritis & inflammatory arthritis | | 3 (15.8%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| First reported arthritis diagnosis | | | | |
| Survey 3 (2001) | | 11 (57.9%) | | |
| Survey 4 (2004) | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Survey 5 (2007) | | 7 (36.8%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Demographics | | | | |
| ^b Age | | | | |
| Mean (SD) | | | 60.3 – 64.7 | 62.5 (1.3) |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Married/de facto | | 14 (73.7%) | | |
| Separated/divorced/widowed | | 4 (21.1%) | | |
| Never married | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |
| Area of residence | | | | |
| Urban | | 6 (31.6%) | | |
| Rural/remote | | 13 (68.4%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0%) | | | |
| Educational attainment | | | | |
| Tertiary/post graduate | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Trade/diploma | | 6 (31.6%) | | |
| School/higher school certificate | | 7 (36.8%) | | |
| No formal education | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Missing | 2 (10.5%) | | | |
| Occupation | | | | |
| Highly skilled | | 4 (21.1%) | | |
| Skilled | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Less skilled | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| No employment | | 9 (47.4%) | | |
| Missing | 3 (15.8%) | | | |
| Country of birth | | | | |
| Australia | | 14 (73.7%) | | |
| Other English speaking | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Europe | | 2 (10.5%) | | |
| Asia | | 1 (5.3%) | | |
| Missing | 0 (0.0%) | | | |

^a means and standard deviations are reported.

^b age at the time of the interview.

Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ): 32-item checklist

Developed from:

Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*. 2007. Volume 19, Number 6: pp. 349 – 357

| No. Item | Guide questions/description | Reported on Page # |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity | | |
| <i>Personal Characteristics</i> | | |
| 1. Inter viewer/facilitator | Which author/s conducted the inter view or focus group? | 6 |
| 2. Credentials | What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD | 6 |
| 3. Occupation | What was their occupation at the time of the study? | 6 |
| 4. Gender | Was the researcher male or female? | 6 |
| 5. Experience and training | What experience or training did the researcher have? | 6 |
| <i>Relationship with participants</i> | | |
| 6. Relationship established | Was a relationship established prior to study commencement? | 6 |
| 7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer | What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research | N/A |
| 8. Interviewer characteristics | What characteristics were reported about the inter viewer/facilitator? e.g. Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic | 7 |
| Domain 2: study design | | |
| <i>Theoretical framework</i> | | |
| 9. Methodological orientation and Theory | What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis | 7 |
| <i>Participant selection</i> | | |
| 10. Sampling | How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball | 6 |
| 11. Method of approach | How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email | 6 |
| 12. Sample size | How many participants were in the study? | 9 |
| 13. Non-participation | How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons? | 9 |

| | | |
|--|---|-------|
| <i>Setting</i> | | |
| 14. Setting of data collection | Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace | 7 |
| 15. Presence of non-participants | Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers? | N/A |
| 16. Description of sample | What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date | 9 |
| <i>Data collection</i> | | |
| 17. Interview guide | Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested? | 7 |
| 18. Repeat interviews | Were repeat inter views carried out? If yes, how many? | N/A |
| 19. Audio/visual recording | Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data? | 6-7 |
| 20. Field notes | Were field notes made during and/or after the inter view or focus group? | 7 |
| 21. Duration | What was the duration of the inter views or focus group? | 7 |
| 22. Data saturation | Was data saturation discussed? | 7-8 |
| 23. Transcripts returned | Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction? | N/A |
| Domain 3: analysis and findings | | |
| <i>Data analysis</i> | | |
| 24. Number of data coders | How many data coders coded the data? | 8 |
| 25. Description of the coding tree | Did authors provide a description of the coding tree? | N/A |
| 26. Derivation of themes | Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data? | 8 |
| 27. Software | What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data? | 8 |
| 28. Participant checking | Did participants provide feedback on the findings? | 21 |
| <i>Reporting</i> | | |
| 29. Quotations presented | Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number | 8 |
| 30. Data and findings consistent | Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings? | 17-22 |
| 31. Clarity of major themes | Were major themes clearly presented in the findings? | 10-16 |
| 32. Clarity of minor themes | Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes? | 12 |