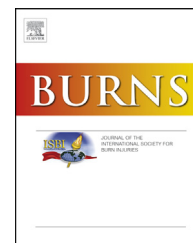


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## Men, fire, and burns: Stories of fighting, healing, and emotions

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### ABSTRACT

Burn recovery is a difficult process full of physical and psychological challenges. With increasing survival rates, there has been renewed interest in the psychological aspects of burn recovery. As men represent over 70% of all burn patients, it is particularly important to study how men experience and interpret this process. We interviewed a purposeful sample of ten adult male burn survivors from different age and cultural groups in the first 16 weeks of their recovery and asked them to discuss the problems they faced. Narrative analysis was used to interpret the interviews. In their narratives, the men tended to emphasize gains in their physical recovery; that is, they often used metaphors of “fighting” to demonstrate how committed they were to their healing. Further, they put less emphasis on the emotional aspects of their recovery. In our discussion, we compare these complex storylines to coping strategies identified in the literature and discuss why men may choose these strategies. Based on our findings we argue that it is important for health care providers to be aware of societal pressures which may influence burn survivors to minimize affective elements of burn recovery. Additionally, we encourage exploring and capitalizing on men’s “fighting” stories during rehabilitation in order to foster an active role which men can take in their recovery.

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## 1. Introduction

Recovery from burn is often a long and arduous process comprised of painful procedures, lengthy hospital stays,

physical and cosmetic disfigurement, and numerous psychosocial issues [1]. Most burn survivors encounter pain, disability, and psychological difficulties which can have a chronic impact on their lives [2]. In the past, research dedicated to understanding the psychological outcomes of

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burn survivors was often overshadowed by an emphasis on the physical damage caused by these injuries. This is despite data which suggested that burn severity may not be the best predictor of psychosocial functioning or psychological distress [3,4]. Recently there has been increasing interest on the subjective experience of burn survivors whereby studies investigate issues that burn survivors consider important in their recovery. These issues include difficulties with body image, pain, returning to work, and their interaction with social supports [5–7]. Even with this new emphasis, what has been left out of the picture is the impact of gender on how burn survivors experience and understand their recovery. The one study that looked at gender, focused on how women understand their burns [8]. Women in that study appeared ambivalent about their injuries, narrating stories of both recovery and distress concurrently. Notably absent from the literature is the unique way men cope with recovering from their burns, despite men representing over 70% of all burn survivors [9].

Numerous studies have demonstrated that masculinity has impacted men's treatment seeking and coping with many medical difficulties [10–12] which could be generalized to men healing from burns. In western societies, masculinity has been described as a cultural construct which prescribes men's beliefs and behaviors. Through socialization, men often learn to value gender roles that prioritize status, power, and physical ability, and furthermore are taught to believe that they need to be tough, rational, unemotional, strong, and assertive [13,14]. These characteristics can influence not only the repertoire of strategies available to men in order to cope, but also the ones they may prefer to use, or think are best to deal with their burns. It can also inform the kinds of experiences men find especially distressing. For example, the disfigurement associated with burns can have specific social, emotional, and physical consequences (e.g. 1–4), all of which can be interpreted in the light of men's socialization.

In western culture, men's socialization often assumes an ideal body image that emphasizes physical ability and function rather than appearance [15,16]. As men try to regain physical ability during burn recovery, stiffness and pain often get in the way, an experience which can be quite distressing for them. In contrast, when women were asked about their recovery from a burn, they discussed their change in appearance at length but did not identify functionality as a distressing aspect of their post-burn body image [8]. Of course, men may also have to adapt to a change in their appearance, and some of them also might find this distressing [17], but as a result of socialization, they often do not have appropriate resources to help them with this adjustment. Particularly important, asking for emotional or social support can be very difficult for men after an injury because it might challenge their sense of independence [18]. However it may nevertheless be required. For example, the physical limitations placed on male burn survivors by pain, physical difficulties, and a dissatisfaction with changes in appearance have been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and difficulties with sleep [20] and have been shown to be barriers to experiencing competence at work and in other important life roles [17,19].

Research has yet to capture men's subjective thoughts about recovery from the specific challenges and barriers they

might encounter during the process of healing from burns. At this time, we know very little about men's experiences of coping and healing, and how they understand the relationship between the two. In other words, we do not know what kinds of stories they tell in order to make sense of what is happening to them. Although some literature has described men's reactions to disability experienced due to a burn [17], this research has not fully addressed the complex problem solving which men engage in during recovery from a burn. Another body of work has suggested that some strategies of coping can be either helpful or detrimental to the outcome of treatment for a burn [21–24]. An understanding of how men perceive their burn (or respond to their burn) can help our understanding on why some of the strategies are important and chosen by men. In this paper, we show that studying the stories men tell about their challenges in the recovery process helps in delineating how they adjust (or do not adjust) to their burns.

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## 2. Method

### 2.1. Rationale

Narratives about the experience of injuries and illness and the healing from them are generically called illness narratives [25]. Illness narratives or “broken narratives” are used to make sense of changes in people's relationships with their bodies, the interruptions in their daily lives following an injury, and the difficulties experienced with mental health [26,27]. By telling stories, people are given the experiential space and tools to reflect on and sort through their experiences. This is done by drawing on a broad repertoire of narrative resources including gender specific plot constructions, storylines, and metaphors which offer cultural instructions, norms, and expectations for how to understand and interpret their experiences [28]. Through the narratives men construct during their healing process, they reveal the gendered roles and beliefs which are important to them in the context of recovery [13]. This is accomplished by analyzing what stories they choose to emphasize, and further how they discuss them [29].

In this study, we view men's stories as windows through which we understand how they approach their recovery and cope with a plethora of difficulties faced after their burns [30]. Through the analysis of such illness narratives, we paid particular attention to the specific make-up of these narratives, including their plots, storylines, metaphors, and other narrative elements. In this way, we strove to provide a rich understanding of how men experience and navigate burn recovery, highlighting how men coped with pain, physical impairments, changes in body appearance, and emotional difficulties – all of which were addressed in their narratives.

### 2.2. Participants and recruitment

We recruited a purposeful sample of ten adult male burn survivors ranging in age from 19 to 54 years old who were being treated at a Canadian regional burn center. The time from the interview to the date which participants had experienced their burn ranged from 1 to 16 weeks. Six

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