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Background & Purpose

- Experiences of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) self-care often involve dealing with emotional and psychological challenges arising from disruptions to a person's self-perception¹ or their identity².
- One aim of our qualitative study was to explore lived experiences, from individuals with RA, on self-perception and identity during an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic³.

Method

- A semi-structured one-to-one interview (30-70 mins); transcribed verbatim
- A constructivist, qualitative design
- A collaborative, reflexive thematic analysis⁵
- Participants purposively sampled from a randomized controlled trial between December 2020 – December 2021.⁴ Eligible participants lived in British Columbia with: A physician-confirmed diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis; No joint surgery in the past 6 months; No history of acute injury to any joints in the past 6 months; Access to an email address and daily access to a computer or mobile device.

Participants' Demographics

Characteristics (n = 39)

Female	36 (92%)
Age Range	28-86 years (median 55 years)
Annual Household Income	\$12,000 (n=1) - \$100,000 (n=12)
University Degree or Higher	24 (63%)
General health was very good, good or fair	35 (93%)
Diagnosed with RA between 2019-2021	13 (33%)
Reported feeling down, depressed, or hopeless over the previous 2 weeks for several days to nearly every day	17 (45%)

Three Preliminary Themes

1) Taking time to self-reflect

Some participants described how the COVID-19 pandemic afforded them more time to learn more about themselves and connect with the emotions they felt.

I have the time to reflect in the morning... a daily habit to like stop and address either what's stressing me out or whatever is going on... I feel more confident that I can figure it out, simply based on the other things that I have learned about myself over the pandemic. [Sam]

Like I said I used to just enjoy doing; so if I wasn't cooking or cleaning, I was gardening or running. But now, I also enjoy sitting in your feelings and processing and what that brings – whether it's tears or gratitude. [Ruth]

2) Being perceived differently

Participants described how they were perceived after feeling forced to disclose their vaccination status and/or RA diagnosis for the first time. For some participants being perceived differently interfered with their routine self-care behaviours (e.g., being physically active). Others expressed experiences of unequal treatment and/or a threat of violence from ongoing racism.

I had it posted on my door of my office that I'm immune compromised, don't come in... I had no intentions of telling anybody but with COVID I had to. [Selina]

"With me, going out for a walk is easy prey, because I'm Asian... someone would go up to another person that's Asian or they think is Asian and would just push them to the ground, trip them on purpose... I've seen it on TV many times.... calling it Asian prey. [Stitch]

3) Participating differently in roles

Most participated experienced disruptions in how they participate in various social roles (e.g., as a parent).

Helping [my daughter] adjust through the changes was difficult... my mom was in a care facility, they had all of the same restrictions as the care homes, dealing with my elderly mother and my daughter are the tough parts, but not as bad for myself. [Anais]

COVID really allowed me that time to really stop and not be distracted by just everything we do in life and to really focus on what do I need to change in my life to make it better, to be happier. [Ann]

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Conclusions

Findings may be helpful for designing self-care programs and to assist healthcare professionals recognize the invisible work done by people with RA as they negotiate valued social roles, identity and sense of self during the pandemic.