

The Role of Social Support Networks in Cancer Survivorship

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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK



Social Support

Defined:

- ❑ Resources provided by other persons
- ❑ Cognitive appraisal of being ‘reliably connected to significant others in a given social environment’ (Mathisen et al, 2007).

Types of Support:

- ❑ Emotional
- ❑ Instrumental
- ❑ Informational

Lower Levels of Perceived Social Support

Lower levels of perceived social support among women with cancer are associated with lower QOL scores on multiple domains:

- ❑ General health
- ❑ Emotional well-being
- ❑ Energy/fatigue
- ❑ Role limitations due to emotional problems
- ❑ Social functioning

E. A. Waters, Y. Liu, M. Schootman & D. B. Jeffe. (2013).

Higher Levels of Perceived Social Support

Social support is consistently associated with positive outcomes in adult cancer patients

- ❑ Better adjustment to cancer
- ❑ Better coping
- ❑ Lower levels of depression
- ❑ Better quality of life (QOL)

Wong-Kim & Bloom, 2005; Kasparian, McLoone & Butow, 2009; Knobf, 2011.

Rodriguez, A.M., Mayo, N.E. & Gagnon, B. (2013). Independent contributors to overall quality of life in people with advanced cancer. *British Journal of Cancer*, 108, 1790–1800 | doi: 10.1038/bjc.2013.146

- ❑ 203 participants
- ❑ 85% over the age of 51 with average age of 63
- ❑ 59% males and 41% females

- ❑ Social support was found to be the most important contributor to overall QOL
- ❑ People with cancer who reported being supported by their social surrounding also reported higher levels of overall QOL

Age

Young adult cancer survivors (20-40 years old)

- ❑ Total perceived social support associated with greater psychological well-being
 - ❑ consistent with research about older adult cancer survivors
- ❑ More specifically, availability of someone with whom to talk (Trevino, 2013)
- ❑ Young adult survivors ranked “opportunities to meet other YA cancer patients and/or survivors” as their greatest supportive care need (Zebrack, et al., 2006)
- ❑ Opportunities to access mental health counseling services (Zebrack, 2008)

Gender

- ❑ The male cancer experience has received less overall research attention compared to research about female cancer survivors (Keller & Henrich, 1999; Moynihan, 2002).
- ❑ In one study, 296 men with advanced cancer were evaluated
 - ❑ Social support scores significantly predicted total overall QOL scores, to the same extent that psychological or physical symptoms did (Hwang et al, 2004).
- ❑ In general, findings re: male attendance in cancer support groups
 - ❑ Male participation rates much lower than that of the females
 - ❑ Men's preference for information and advocacy, larger groups, expert speakers, and efficient meetings
 - ❑ In contrast, women reported interest in intimacy and peer knowledge

Trapp, S.K.; Woods, J.D.; Grove, A. & Stern, M. (2013). Male coping processes as demonstrated in the context of a cancer-related social support group. *Support Care Cancer*, 21:619–627 DOI 10.1007/s00520-012-1565-x

- ❑ Small qualitative study
- ❑ Challenged the solitary coping and emotionally restrictive qualities associated with the male gender role supported by the limited research
- ❑ Emphasized connection and emotional support in male coping efforts.
- ❑ Preferences of group qualities (e.g., participant characteristics and session topics) included an interest in connection, mixed sex groups, and groups composed of mixed cancer diagnoses.
- ❑ **Despite the view that men tend to seek independence, the participants consistently described their interest in connection through the qualities of small groups and cohesiveness among group members**
- ❑ **Information was sought but, contrary to the literature, which indicates a preference to seek information over support; the participants described an appreciation for information in a connective context**
- ❑ **When asked which was most valued, they reported a *preference of connection over information***

Race

- ❑ Overall 5-year cancer survival rate for African Americans has improved in the past 4 decades from a low of 27% in the 1960s to current rates of 58%
- ❑ Despite these promising trends, African Americans continue to suffer disproportionately from cancer morbidity and mortality
- ❑ Emerging evidence suggests potential quality of life (QOL) disparities in the survivorship period

Janz, et al., 2009; Powe et al., 2007; Garofalo et al., 2006

Ju, V & Zhang, A. (2014). African American cancer patients' social network and support. *Psycho-oncology*, supplement, 1, 23, 79.

- ❑ Qualitative study of African American cancer survivors
- ❑ A significant association between depression and a lack of social support, particularly family support

Matthews, et al. (2012). Correlates of quality of life among African American and white cancer survivors. *Cancer Nursing*, 35, 5.

- ❑ Quantitative study of 248 African American and 244 White respondents
- ❑ Survivors were on average three (3) years beyond diagnosis and treatment
- ❑ Majority of respondents well-adjusted
- ❑ Cancer-related distress typically resolves over time

However

- ❑ Differences in adjustment were observed based *solely* on race
- ❑ Higher social support levels associated with increased MHQOL among African Americans

Conclusions

- ❑ Social support is a significant correlate with overall QOL
 - ❑ Young adult and older adult cancer survivors
 - ❑ Female and male survivors
 - ❑ African Americans and White cancer survivors

- ❑ Social supports can be formal and informal
 - ❑ Family
 - ❑ Friends
 - ❑ Other cancer survivors
 - ❑ Churches, synagogues, mosques
 - ❑ Support groups
 - ❑ Health care providers – physicians, nurses, social workers, counselors

Conclusions (cont.)

- Social support can be emotional, instrumental and/or informational
- Recommendation to measure social supports as part of the assessment of people with cancer as they are key elements of their well-being and quality of life (Gallagher and Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Hahn et al, 2010; McCabe and Cronin, 2011).

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