The Role of Social Support Networks in Cancer Survivorship

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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

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)


- 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

- 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

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


- 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).


