Grief and Gracefulness Regarding Cancer Experiences Among Young Women

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Purpose/Objectives: To gain a unique perspective of young women with cancer aged 20–39 years who are experiencing challenges with fertility and parenting through analysis of cancer blogs.

Research Approach: A secondary analysis of online narratives using a focused thematic analysis approach, comparing women who were mothers prior to diagnosis with women who are exploring the possibility of motherhood after diagnosis.

Setting: Blogs found through websites and social media venues for young adults with cancer.

Participants: 10 women aged 20–39 who maintained blogs about their cancer experiences.

Methodologic Approach: Thematic analysis using line-by-line coding. Construction of comparative themes and meanings were guided by the analytic framework of the stages of grief.

Findings: Themes emerged along the grieving trajectory of denial (maintaining routines and discussing “eggs”), depression (losing motherhood and anticipatory grief), and acceptance (finding joy moment to moment and hope for pregnancy).

Conclusions: Motherhood and infertility are unique experiences for young women with cancer but are expressed similarly through the stages of grief: denial, depression, and acceptance.

Interpretation: Understanding the grief trajectories of young women with cancer will help nurses to develop screening tools and supportive interventions.

The challenges for young women with cancer aged 20–39 years are complex and include disruptions in identity development and barriers to reaching life milestones, such as family initiation and parenthood (Love & Donovan, 2014). The difficulties are similar to those for young adults in general, but young women are faced with compounding challenges because of their roles as single women, wives, and/or mothers. Often, young women desire to begin or grow their families, but those aspirations are placed on hold while the multitude of decisions surrounding cancer treatment takes precedence. Therefore, women who may become infertile because of cancer treatment and those who balance parenthood with cancer treatment begin the process of grieving. While desiring to have a child and caring for a child are not the same, these groups of women still have important similarities and differences. This study will explore their unique experiences through a secondary analysis of an ethnographic study of blogs of young adult women with cancer (Keim-Malpass & Steeves, 2012).