Optimism, Symptom Distress, Illness Appraisal, and Coping in Patients With Advanced-Stage Cancer Diagnoses Undergoing Chemotherapy Treatment

Catherine Sumpio, PhD, MSN, RN, OCN®, Sangchoon Jeon, PhD, Laurel L. Northouse, PhD, RN, FAAN, and M. Tish Knobf, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN

**Purpose/Objectives:** To explore the relationships between optimism, self-efficacy, symptom distress, treatment complexity, illness appraisal, coping, and mood disturbance in patients with advanced-stage cancer.

**Design:** Cross-sectional study.

**Setting:** Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven in Connecticut, an outpatient comprehensive cancer center.

**Sample:** A convenience sample of 121 adult patients with stages III–IV cancer undergoing active chemotherapy.

**Methods:** Participants completed common self-report questionnaires to measure variables. Treatment hours and visits were calculated from data retrieved from medical record review. Mediation and path analysis were conducted to identify direct and indirect pathways from the significant antecedent variables to mood disturbance.

**Main Research Variables:** Dispositional optimism, self-efficacy, social support, treatment complexity, symptom distress, illness appraisal, coping, and mood disturbance.

**Findings:** Greater optimism and self-efficacy were associated with less negative illness appraisal, less avoidant coping, and decreased mood disturbance. Conversely, greater symptom distress was associated with greater negative illness appraisal, greater avoidant coping, and greater mood disturbance. In the final model, optimism and symptom distress had direct and indirect effects on mood disturbance. Indirect effects were partially mediated by illness appraisal.

**Conclusions:** Mood disturbance resulted from an interaction of disease stressors, personal resources, and cognitive appraisal of illness. Avoidant coping was associated with greater disturbed mood, but neither avoidant nor active coping had a significant effect on mood in the multivariate model.

**Implications for Nursing:** Illness appraisal, coping style, and symptom distress are important targets for intervention. Optimism is a beneficial trait and should be included, along with coping style, in comprehensive nursing assessments of patients with cancer.