Symptoms Experience: A Concept Analysis

Terri S. Armstrong, MS, APRN, BC

Purpose/Objectives: To provide a clearly constructed definition of the concept of symptoms experience.

Data Sources: Articles and book chapters.

Data Synthesis: Symptoms experience has not been explored previously. Several approaches to the concept of symptoms have been addressed, including symptom occurrence, symptom distress, and unpleasant symptoms. Limitations of these approaches may include the lack of focus on symptoms as occurring concurrently or in clusters or the multiplicative nature of symptoms. In addition, situational and existential meaning often is not explored.

Conclusions: Symptoms experience is the perception of the frequency, intensity, distress, and meaning of symptoms as they are produced and expressed. Symptoms are multiplicative in nature and may act as catalysts for the occurrence of other symptoms. Antecedents to the symptoms experience include demographic, disease, and individual factors. Consequences include the impact on mood state, psychological status, functional status, quality of life, disease progression, and survival.

Implications for Nursing: Evaluation of symptoms in patients with cancer should include a meaning-centered approach, in which symptoms are evaluated not only for occurrence characteristics and perceived distress but also for the meaning of the symptoms experience to individuals.

Key Points . . .

➤ Current evidence suggests that symptoms may occur in clusters, be multiplicative in nature, and act as catalysts for other symptoms.

➤ The meaning that the symptoms experience has to patients may influence the symptom occurrence or perceived distress that patients experience.

➤ Current methods to evaluate symptoms are limited by measuring symptom occurrence and distress individually and often do not consider the meaning or importance of symptoms to patients.

Literature Review

The word “symptom” can be traced to its Latin origin synthoma and first was used in its present sense in the 1600s (Rhodes & Watson, 1987). Sign was differentiated from symptom in the 1800s, with signs being described as alterations that can be ascertained by the sense of the observer and symptoms as changes in the functions of the parts affected (Rhodes & Watson). Several theories recently have been developed that attempt to explain the occurrence of symptoms and the relation of symptoms to other factors (Lenz et al., 1997; Leventhal & Johnson, 1983; Rhodes & Watson). In Leventhal and Johnson’s theory of self-regulation, symptoms are concrete representations of disease experienced by individuals as a component of cognitive processing. Their work highlights the differentiation between the occurrence of a symptom (a concrete, objective event) and the emotional response to that event. Lenz et al. developed a middle-range theory of unpleasant symptoms and defined symptoms as “perceived indicators of change in normal functioning as experienced by patients” (p. 3). They conceptualized each symptom to be a multidimensional experience that can be measured separately or in combination with other symptoms. Rhodes and Watson defined symptoms as subjective phenomena regarded by individuals as an indication of a condition departing from normal function, sensation, or appearance or as perceived

Terri S. Armstrong, MS, APRN, BC, is a doctoral student and clinical assistant professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Texas—Houston and a neuro-oncology nurse practitioner for the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. (Submitted June 2002. Accepted for publication November 22, 2002.)

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