Antecedents and Outcomes of Uncertainty in Older Adults With Cancer: A Scoping Review of the Literature

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Uncertainty is defined as a “period of anticipation prior to confrontation with a potentially harmful event” (Monat, Averill, & Lazarus, 1972, p. 237) and is a common experience in cancer (Applebaum et al., 2014; Gil et al., 2006; Maher & De Vries, 2011). The unknown etiology and unpredictable future of cancer can prompt a sense of sustained uncertainty lingering throughout the cancer journey (Mishel, 1981; Wright, Afari, & Zautra, 2009). Lack of ability to define and classify illness-related events (Mishel, 1988) and predict treatment outcomes can provoke an apprehensive feeling of uncertainty (Penrod, 2001) that can adversely affect patients’ psychosocial well-being (Ferrans, 1994; Gotay & Muraoka, 1998; Henderson, 1997). The cancer survivorship literature frequently locates uncertainty within the stress and coping model and suggests that uncertainty surrounding cancer can impair coping and adaptation through intensifying negative effects of stress and paralyzing anticipatory coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mishel, Hostetter, King, & Graham, 1984; Wonghongkul, Moore, Musil, Schneider, & Deimling, 2000). Higher levels of uncertainty have been shown to be associated with poorer quality of life (QOL), greater levels of emotional distress, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and...