Nurse Experiences as Cancer Survivors: Part I—Personal

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Purpose/Objectives: To uncover dimensions of nurses’ personal experiences of cancer survivorship.

Design: Interpretive, phenomenologic.

Setting: Metropolitan area in the northeastern United States.

Sample: 25 RNs diagnosed with cancer. Average age was 50 years, and 20 participants were less than five years from initial diagnosis.


Main Research Variables: Nurses’ personal experiences of cancer survivorship.

Findings: Themes of the nurses’ personal experiences of survivorship included the shock of becoming a patient and multifaceted dimensions of the treatment experience, including time, coordinating their own care, the struggle to maintain normalcy, uncertainty, nonclinical self-care strategies, and encounters with caring and uncaring providers. Participants identified the need for supportive relationships both in personal and professional arenas throughout the survivorship process. The cancer experience became an opportunity for change in priorities.

Conclusions: Although nurse cancer survivors experience similar personal vulnerabilities to those of non-nurses, their vulnerabilities often are affected by their knowledge of the healthcare process and content of care with which they are most familiar. They also are affected by what they know is at stake. This particular insider vulnerability is not cited often in research literature and, therefore, is not recognized as a particular type of need that should be addressed in cancer survivorship.

Implications for Nursing: Nurse patients need providers to be sensitive to their information and support needs, which may vary because of their professional experiences and personal resources. Findings suggest that nurse patients may need supportive approaches that target their unique vulnerabilities.