Types of Social Support in African Americans With Cancer

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Key Points . . .

➤ Researchers have acknowledged that race or ethnicity and culture affect the social support experiences of patients with cancer, yet these studies generally have focused on western, white, middle-class people.

➤ Evidence exists that African Americans may not use or benefit from types of support as typically defined.

➤ Knowledge of the role that social support plays in coping with cancer among African Americans is needed as caregivers strive to improve the health outcomes for this population.

Social support can have many positive benefits for patients with cancer, allowing patients to talk about their cancer-related worries and concerns, obtain information and advice about the disease and its associated treatment, and receive assistance with finances or household tasks (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996; Hoskins et al., 1996; Reynolds et al., 1994). The availability of social support has been shown to positively influence attitudes toward health care (Mishel & Braden, 1987), aid psychological adjustment to illness (Bloom & Speigel, 1984; Funch & Mettlin, 1982; Northouse, 1988), buffer stress (Speigel, 1992), and even increase survival rates (Carlsson & Hamrin, 1994; Reynolds et al.; Speigel, Bloom, Kraemer, & Gottheil, 1989; Waxler-Morrison, Hislop, Mears, & Kan, 1991).

Although the benefits of social support as a general resource for people with cancer have been investigated, these studies generally have focused on white, middle-class people (Beder, 1995; Northouse, 1995; Reynolds et al., 1994; Rodrigue, 1997; Stewart & Tilden, 1995). When African American patients with cancer have been included in research, the discovery of presumably lower amounts of social support has led researchers to conclude that African Americans are socially isolated and lacking social support (O’Hare, Malone, Lusk, & McCorkle, 1993; Ostrow et al., 1991; Rodrigue). But what is not clear is whether lower amounts of social support actually result from a lack of resources or the failure to identify them because of cultural differences that are not taken into account.

The purpose of this article is to describe the types of social support a group of African American women and men used to cope with the experience of cancer. Using a grounded theory approach, the authors examined social support in African American women and men treated for breast cancer. The study was supported by a Minority Supplement for Graduate Research Assistant Training from NCI and NIH, R01 CA 78955. (Submitted June 2003. Accepted for publication September 30, 2003.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/04.ONF.792-800