A New Way of Thinking About Fatigue: A Reconceptualization

Karin Olson, RN, PhD

Purpose/Objectives: To present a reconceptualization of fatigue.

Data Sources: Studies indexed in CINAHL®, MEDLINE®, PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, and CancerLIT from 1995–2004; studies included in the bibliographies of indexed articles; and five qualitative studies conducted by the author.

Data Synthesis: Tiredness and exhaustion are conceptually distinct from fatigue. All three concepts are located along an adaptational continuum in a manner consistent with stress theory.

Conclusions: Interventions should focus on the elimination or reduction of stressors and the increase of patients’ resistance to stressors.

Implications for Nursing: Interventions that prevent or delay progression from tiredness to fatigue will be different from those that prevent or delay progression from fatigue to exhaustion.

Nursing colleagues initially identified the lack of fit between clinical observations and existing conceptualizations of fatigue in an outpatient oncology setting. In response to queries about how they were feeling, patients told nurses that they were “so tired.” Some withdrew from potentially curative treatment, saying that they were “too tired.” The author conducted a review of the conceptualizations of cancer-related fatigue, summarized in this article, in an attempt to identify factors that might distinguish individuals who withdrew from treatment because of fatigue from those who did not report fatigue and were able to continue treatment as planned.

Key Points . . .

➤ Tiredness, fatigue, and exhaustion are hypothesized to be behavioral markers for degrees of adaptation to stressors.
➤ Interventions should focus on reducing stressors and increasing patients’ abilities to resist stressors.
➤ The nursing interventions for the prevention or at least the delay of fatigue are likely to be different from those for the prevention or at least the delay of exhaustion.
➤ Recovery from exhaustion to fatigue and from fatigue to tiredness is possible but very difficult in the context of advanced cancer. Nevertheless, interventions that may achieve these objectives should be included in cancer rehabilitation programs.

Karin Olson, RN, PhD, is an associate professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. The research for this article was supported by grants from the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research; the Alberta Cancer Board; the Health, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences Research Fund at the University of Alberta; and the Hole Family Fund in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. (Submitted May 2005. Accepted for publication March 29, 2006.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/07.ONF.93-99