Examining Emotional Outcomes Among a Multiethnic Cohort of Breast Cancer Survivors

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The cancer experience is emotionally challenging (Koopman et al., 2001; Stanton et al., 2000). The resulting emotional sequelae of cancer and its treatments include fear, worry, hopelessness, and sadness, as well as measurable psychological distress with anxiety and depression (Lyons, Jacobson, Prescott, & Oswalt, 2002; Taylor, 2000). These emotional responses are temporary among most survivors, who experience emotional recovery within one to three years. But, for some survivors, these emotions can manifest into chronic and persistent psychological stressors (Basen-Engquist, Hughes, Perkins, Shinn, & Taylor, 2008; Stanton, 2006). In addition, ethnic minority survivors report greater need for information, emotional support, and navigational assistance in their cancer care (Fatone, Moadel, Foley, Fleming, & Jandorf, 2007; Moadel, Morgan, & Dutcher, 2007). Little is known about how specific emotional concerns of breast cancer survivors vary by ethnic group membership. Providing optimal care for ethnic minority breast cancer survivors requires an understanding of the psychological and emotional effects of the disease and treatment.

Background

Emotional Outcomes for Breast Cancer Survivors

Emotions are defined as the consequence that arises from a conscious mental reaction subjectively experienced as strong feelings usually directed toward a specific experience and typically accompanied by physiologic and behavior changes in the body (American Heritage Dictionary, 2009). Emotional outcomes are noted as an important domain of overall health-related quality of life (HRQOL) in cancer survivors (Dow, Ferrell, Haberman, & Eaton, 1999; Ferrell, Smith, Cullinane, & Melancon, 2003). Generally, emotional outcomes improve during the first two years after cancer treatment and stabilize thereafter (Burgess et al., 2005; Neyt & Albrecht, 2006). In addition, positive emotional outcomes among survivors, such as finding meaning and purpose in life, experiencing optimistic changes in outlook, and greater appreciation of life, have been documented (Bower et al., 2005; Foley et al., 2006; Meyerowitz, Kurita, & D’Orazio, 2008). However, areas of continuing emotional disruption for breast cancer survivors exist. Some studies report uncertainty, somatic distress (lack of sleep and appetite changes), decreased self-esteem, fear of recurrence, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and depression to be key concerns (Morgan et al., 2007).