Image of God: Effect on Coping and Psychospiritual Outcomes in Early Breast Cancer Survivors

Judith A. Schreiber, RN, PhD

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in women in the United States, with a five-year survival rate of 89% (Jemal, Siegel, Xu, & Ward, 2010). As a result, breast cancer survivors represent 23% of the American cancer survivor population (Rowland & Bellizzi, 2008). Cancer can negatively affect a survivor’s life in relation to his or her physical, social, existential or religious, and psychological well-being. Since 1990, a number of studies have focused on breast cancer survivors, with the majority addressing issues related to longer-term survivors (five or more years) (Bower et al., 2005; Carver et al., 2005; Carver, Smith, Petronis, & Antoni, 2006; Deimling, Bowman, Sterns, Wagner, & Kahana, 2006; Ferrell, Dow, Leigh, Ly, & Gulasekaram, 1995; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Meraviglia, 2006; Stanton, Danoff-Burg, & Huggins, 2002). The transition for a survivor from active treatment to post-treatment is a critical time when chosen behaviors and coping mechanisms, including religious coping, predict longer-term adjustment (Jim, Richardson, Golden-Kreutz, & Andersen, 2006; Lauer, Connolly-Nelson, & Vang, 2007; McMillen, 1999; Stanton et al., 2002).

How an individual views the character and behavior of God can be a foundation for one’s world view. An individual’s view of God is believed to influence core strivings and life principles (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998; Maynard, Gorsuch, & Bjorck, 2001; Parmament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005). For this reason, one’s view of God may be a key component in understanding how people diagnosed with cancer respond psychologically and specifically to the coping mechanisms they employ. The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion completed a general population survey on the perceived importance of religion in the lives of Americans (Bader et al., 2006). Belief that denominational affiliation does not significantly contribute to the understanding of an individual’s behavior led to the development of the Image of God Scale (IGS) from questions regarding the character of God included in the general population survey. The IGS has two significant and distinct dimensions of belief in God: God’s level of engagement and God’s level of anger. Based on the two dimensions, four views of God were identified: benevolent, authoritarian, critical, and distant (Bader & Froese, 2005). In the general population survey, images of God were able to predict a variety of factors: moral issues, political opinions, civic engagement, religious consumption, and the paranormal...