Long-Term Breast Cancer Survivors’ Perceptions of Support From Female Partners: An Exploratory Study

J. Lee White, MPH, and Ulrike Boehmer, PhD

Social support represents a powerful resource for coping and recovering women diagnosed with breast cancer. Perceived social support, particularly as it applies to intimate, interpersonal relationships, decreases women’s psychological distress related to cancer (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Koopman, Hermanson, Diamond, Angell, & Spiegel, 1998; Rodin et al., 2007; Talley, Molix, Schlegel, & Bettencourt, 2010) and critically contributes to their psychological well-being and emotional adjustment after diagnosis (Bloom, 1982; Carver, Smith, Petronis, & Antoni, 2006; Ganz et al., 2002; Harrison, Maguire, & Piteathly, 1995; Koopman et al., 1998; Manne, Ostroff, Winkel, Grana, & Fox, 2005; Pistrang & Barker, 1995). Most studies have focused on survivorship among married, heterosexual women. As a result, ample data exist demonstrating that heterosexually partnered women most consistently identify their male spouses and partners as their most important source of social support (Neuling & Winefield, 1988; Rose, 1990), acting as a powerful buffer against their depression and anxiety (Harrison et al., 1995; Manne et al., 2005; Pistrang & Barker, 1995; Talley et al., 2010). In comparison, little research has been conducted on sexual minority women (SMW) (i.e., lesbians, bisexuals, and women who partner with women) and their partners in the context of breast cancer survivorship (Arena et al., 2006; Boehmer, Bowen, & Bauer, 2007; Boehmer, Freund, & Linde, 2005; Fobair et al., 2001, 2002; Katz, 2009; Matthews, Peterman, Delaney, Menard, & Brandenburg, 2002). Research largely has failed to examine the social support experiences and needs that affect quality of life among SMW with a breast cancer diagnosis (Arena et al., 2006; Fobair et al., 2001).

Studies of heterosexual women demonstrate that perceived emotional support, such as partners’ emotional involvement after breast surgery, their willingness to communicate about difficult emotions and experiences, and their expression of empathy, markedly facilitates heterosexual women’s coping and adapting to breast cancer (Fergus & Gray, 2009; Hagedoorn, Sanderman, Bolks, Tuinstra, & Coyne, 2008; Manne et al., 2006; Pistrang & Barker, 1995; Sormanti & Kayser, 2000) and is associated particularly with decreases in women’s emotional distress (Talley et al., 2010; Wimberly, Carver, Laurenceau, Harris, & Antoni, 2005). Conversely, heterosexual women report dissatisfaction and distress when they feel their partners avoid and withdraw from discussions about women’s breast cancer experiences (Lichtman, Taylor, & Wood, 1988; Manne et al., 2006; Neuling & Winefield, 1988; Peters-Golden, 1982; Pistrang & Barker, 1995; Spiegel, Bloom, & Gottheil, 1985; Koopman, Hermanson, Diamond, Angell, & Spiegel, 1998; Rodin et al., 2007; Talley, Molix, Schlegel, & Bettencourt, 2010).