Perspectives on Coping Among Patients With Head and Neck Cancer Receiving Radiation

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Head and neck cancer (HNC) accounts for 3% of all cancers in the United States and is twice as common in men compared to women (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2011). The incidence in the United States was estimated to be 52,000 new cases in 2011 (NCI, 2011). Treatment for HNC is multimodal, including surgery, radiation, and often chemotherapy. Patients’ illness experiences involve physical symptoms, side effects from treatment, symptom distress, and psychological distress (Archer, Hutchison, & Korszun, 2008; Haman, 2008). Patients also experience uncertainty about the effectiveness of an unfamiliar treatment, their ability to manage daily living, and long-term effects of the disease and treatment (Rose & Yates, 2001). Because of uncertainty, each patient perceives illness, cognitively appraises his or her situation, and copes with illness differently (Mishel, 1988).

Patients with HNC experience an array of physical symptoms resulting from their cancer and its treatment (Chandu, Smith, & Rogers, 2006). Symptoms related to side effects of radiation include dysphagia, xerostomia, pain, fatigue, altered taste, mucositis, skin changes, and weight loss (Olmi et al., 2003; Khoda et al., 2005). Symptoms related to side effects of chemotherapy include difficulty swallowing, anemia, nausea, neutropenia, diarrhea, and mucositis (Lambertz, Robenstein, Mueller-Funaiole, Cummings, & Knapp, 2010; Schrijvers, Van Herpen, & Kerger, 2004). Patients with HNC may experience several of these symptoms and side effects at any time during their treatment.

Symptom distress is defined as the degree or amount of physical or mental upset, anguish, or suffering experienced from specific symptoms (Rhodes & Watson, 1987). Few researchers have examined symptom distress among patients with HNC. Lai et al. (2003) reported that patients also experience uncertainty about the effectiveness of an unfamiliar treatment, their ability to manage daily living, and long-term effects of the disease and treatment (Rose & Yates, 2001). Because of uncertainty, each patient perceives illness, cognitively appraises his or her situation, and copes with illness differently (Mishel, 1988).

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