The Relationship of Fatigue and Meaning in Life in Breast Cancer Survivors

This material is protected by U.S. copyright law. Unauthorized reproduction is prohibited. To purchase quantity reprints, please e-mail reprints@ons.org or to request permission to reproduce multiple copies, please e-mail pubpermissions@ons.org.

Paige Thompson, RN, DNSc

Key Points . . .

➤ Fatigue and other symptoms, including difficulty sleeping, worrying, pain, and feeling irritable and nervous, are present in breast cancer survivors as many as 16 months after treatment.

➤ Fatigue and other symptoms in breast cancer survivors are related to physical and social functioning.

➤ Assessment of meaning in life may be most important in late stages of cancer, in the first six months following cancer treatment, in patients taking antidepressants, and in survivors not eligible for hormonal therapy.

Literature Review

Fatigue

Factors with the potential to influence fatigue levels in cancer survivors have been identified. Cancer treatment is a physiologic factor that is related to fatigue levels in cancer survivors (Monga, Kerrigan, Thornby, & Monga, 1999; Schwartz, 1998). Cancer survivors who received a combination of surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy had significantly greater fatigue than those whose treatment included only surgery or chemotherapy (Schwartz). In addition, Schwartz found that those who received chemotherapy experienced fatigue that was significantly more intense, incapacitating, distressing, or depressing than did subjects receiving only surgery or radiation therapy. Age also was related to fatigue in cancer survivors; however, the influence of age on fatigue varies. In their study, Woo et al. (1998) reported that younger breast cancer survivors experienced greater fatigue, but Loge et al. (2000) found the highest fatigue scores in the oldest survivors (i.e., 60–74 years) of Hodgkin disease.

Cancer survivors have been studied to determine the possible relationship between psychological factors and fatigue. Depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and other cancer stressors are related to fatigue levels in cancer survivors.