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

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Purpose/Objectives: To determine relationships among (a) cancer-related fatigue and meaning in life, (b) overall symptom distress and meaning in life, (c) fatigue and performance, and (d) overall symptom distress and performance in breast cancer survivors.

Design: Cross-sectional and correlational.

Setting: Community-based setting in eastern Pennsylvania.

Sample: 34 women who had completed their last treatment for breast cancer within the prior 16 months.

Methods: Data were collected using the Piper Fatigue Scale (PFS), Life Attitude Profile–Revised (LAP-R), Memorial Symptom Assessment Scale–Short Form (MSAS-SF), and Medical Outcomes Study–Short Form 36 (SF-36).

Main Research Variables: Fatigue and meaning in life.

Findings: One moderate negative correlation was found between the PFS sensory subscale and the choice or responsibleness dimension of the LAP-R. Significant moderate to strong negative correlations were found between the MSAS-SF total score and two subscale scores and the existential transcendence dimension of the LAP-R. Significant moderate to strong negative correlations were found between four subscales of the SF-36 representing performance and the MSAS-SF total score.

Conclusions: Meaning in life may influence fatigue and overall symptoms in breast cancer survivors.

Implications for Nursing: Assessment of meaning in life may be important in the management of fatigue and overall symptoms in women after treatment for breast cancer.

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.

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.