Breast Cancer Survivorship:
Are African American Women Considered?
A Concept Analysis

Barbara Johnson Farmer, MSN, MSA, RN, FNP, and Eva D. Smith, RN, PhD, FAAN

Purpose/Objective: To apply Rodger’s (1989) evolutionary view of concept analysis to the term “cancer survivorship” with a heightened focus on breast cancer and African American women.

Design: Qualitative, concept analysis.

Data Sources: 50 references from the disciplines of nursing and medicine.

Data Synthesis: This analysis revealed that the concept of cancer survivorship is unique, evolving, and based on the meaning individuals give to a diagnosis of cancer and their experiences of living beyond the diagnosis.

Conclusions: The concept of breast cancer survivorship can be operationally defined as the process of living through the cancer experience beyond a breast cancer diagnosis. A crucial need exists to explore the meaning of cancer survivorship among African American women as a basis for culturally competent care.

Implications for Nursing: Nurses and other healthcare professionals must comprehend the meaning of breast cancer survivorship and its implications for cancer survivors. The meaning of cancer survivorship to African American and ethnic minority women must be explored. Culturally relevant cancer survivorship education and care should be provided for African American women and other cancer survivors of ethnic minorities as well as those involved in the women’s social and healthcare world. Nurses and healthcare professionals must continue to advocate for health policies to improve the lived experiences of all cancer survivors.

Key Points . . .

➤ When a concept such as cancer survivorship is developed or clarified inadequately, nurses have little direction to guide the construction of interventions for cancer survivors.

➤ Cancer survivorship is an evolutionary, dynamic, and multifaceted process that is unique, personal, and complex and involves people with cancer as well as those who support or care for them.

➤ Cancer survivorship is an individualized journey. The first step in providing culturally competent care is for nurses and other healthcare professionals to understand the meaning of this journey to cancer survivors.

There is life after breast cancer! But in going through treatment and all the things dealing with my breast cancer, some of the things I have learned are that I could not control all situations. I had to let go and allow God to take control. My spirituality, my faith was totally renewed.

—A breast cancer survivor, 1999

“Survivorship” is a complex term that was introduced in the literature in the mid-1960s (Lew, 1967; Rogot, Goldberg, & Goldstein, 1966). The term initially referred to people who lived beyond catastrophic or traumatic events or the living family members of people who had died. As a biomedical term, it became associated with the length of time a person lives after a catastrophic event, such as cancer. Survivorship is defined by Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1999) as “the state of being a survivor.” A survivor is a person who exists despite adversity, one who continues to live after, or one who comes through, lasts, persists, pulls through, weatheres, outlasts, and outwears. Survivor comes from the Spanish root word vivir, which means “to live.” The concept of cancer survivorship applies to anyone diagnosed with cancer, regardless of prognosis or stage in the illness trajectory (Guillory, 1993; Mullan, 1985).

Survivorship emerged in the professional medical literature during the 1980s with major emphases on biomedical perspectives and length of survival, which was measured in five-year frames. With advances in cancer care and therapy, the number of survivors and the length of survivorship has increased. Survival rates have extended to 20 years and beyond. Likewise, the essence of cancer care has changed to include psychosocial and supporting health policies. These changes influenced the conceptualization of cancer survivorship. Definitions of cancer survivorship changed to not only include the length of time people live after being diagnosed with cancer but also to

Barbara Johnson Farmer, MSN, MSA, RN, FNP, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Eva D. Smith, RN, PhD, FAAN, is an associate professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Illinois in Chicago. (Submitted October 2001. Accepted for publication February 15, 2002.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/02.ONF.779-787