Couples Coping with Cancer

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Cancer is a Dyadic Affair
Distress in couples coping with cancer

How much distress do partners of patients with cancer perceive compared to patients and individuals with a healthy partner?
Results: Distress in couples coping with cancer

Background gender differences in partner distress

- Caregiver research (especially in the context of mental disorders) has demonstrated more psychological distress in women than in men (for an overview, see Miller & Cafasso, 1992).

- Women’s emotional well-being seems to be more strongly affected by characteristics of their intimate partner than men’s emotional well-being (e.g. Cutrona, 1996; McRae & Brody, 1989; Quirouette & Gold, 1992).
Results: Distress in couples coping with cancer

Psychological distress

Does gender play a role in partner distress?

Patient Association Sample  Hospital Sample

Results: Gender differences in partner distress

Similar findings:

- In other studies, including a longitudinal study of breast cancer patients and their spouses (e.g., Hinnen et al., 2009; Tuinstra et al., 2004)

- In couples dealing with other illnesses (Hagedoorn et al., 2001)
Meta-analysis of distress in couples coping with cancer

- Studies assessing distress in both patients and partners: 46 samples between 1980-March 2005

- Individual levels of distress were determined more by gender than by patient-partner role:
  - Women reported consistently more distress than men, regardless of their role

Remaining question

- How can we explain differences in distress between female and male partners of patients?

- Can sex differences in distress among partners of patients be explained by differences in role identity?

- Identity-relevant stress hypothesis.
Results: Identity-relevant stress hypothesis

Distress in couples

- A considerable minority of patients and partners report elevated levels of distress.

- Women appear more vulnerable than men.

- Which couples are at risk for distress? And

- How can we help these couples?
Couples *coping* with cancer
Couples coping with cancer

- The intimate relationship is a resource both patients and partners may draw upon
- Spousal behavior is important in relation to wellbeing and relationship satisfaction
Dyadic coping in couples dealing with cancer

- Dyadic analyses; partners influence each other
- Moderators of the spousal behavior – wellbeing link:
  - Relationship context (past spousal supportiveness)
  - Individual differences (personal control, regulatory focus)
  - Interplay between patient and partner behavior
In closing

- Couples approach fruitful; similar findings for patients and partners
- Need for research into theoretical rationale
- Need for intervention research to test the usefulness of these findings in practice
Thank you!

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