

The Impact of Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment on Self-Perceived Identity and Support Systems



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Background

Each year, approximately 2 million individuals receive a cancer diagnosis (American Cancer Society, 2023). This can profoundly impact one's physical and emotional self-perception, straining social relationships, romantic partnerships, family connections, and friendships. Many cancer patients also face challenges in socializing due to unemployment and social isolation (Wang et al., 2022).

Significance

The psychological distress of a cancer diagnosis can affect mental health, often leading to feelings of guilt, burden, and fear. The financial burden of medical treatments adds considerable stress for both patients and their caregivers. Caregivers also experience psychosocial effects and often take on roles and responsibilities previously managed by the patient (Wang et al., 2022).

Methods

This qualitative project used narrative inquiry, ecomaps, and thematic analysis to better understand people's unique identities and situations. Erikson's Theory of Human Development provided the theoretical lens to understand the experiences of participants in the context of their lives (McLeod, 2024). Patients were asked a series of questions that helped to examine support systems and roles within their lives. A total of six patients were interviewed; ages ranged from 48-85 years old and each interview lasted 15-45 minutes.

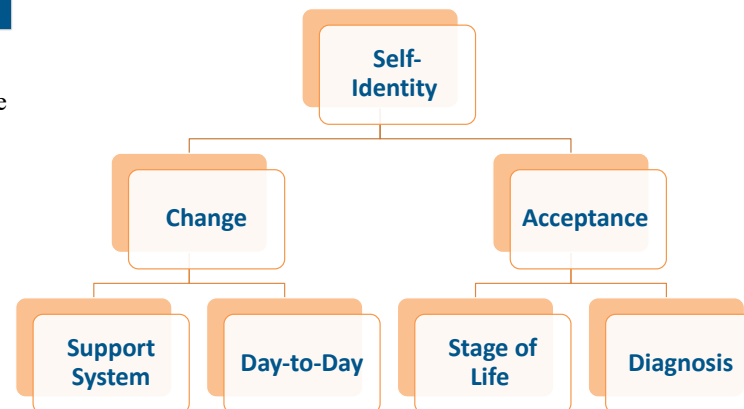
Clinical Question

How do patients describe their identity and role changes related to their cancer diagnosis?

"I am not a cancer patient; I am a patient with cancer"

Findings

- People saw changes in their support systems and day-to-day lives.
- Participants' acceptance was impacted by their stage of life and diagnosis.



Discussion

While participants did not report a sense that their identity as a person changed, they did see changes in their day-to-day lives and relationships. They expressed a feeling of wanting to live each day to the fullest. While a person might not report distress, they still need to adapt to how their lives and relationships are changing and may need support with this process.

Due to the small sample size and timeline of this project additional work exploring changes in self-identity within the context of a cancer diagnosis is recommended.

Recommendations

Cancer focused healthcare organizations should provide trained therapeutic providers in a supportive environment where patients can express their feelings and better adapt to these changes. While it is important to identify patients most in distress, it is beneficial for all patients to have the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings towards their diagnosis and experiences throughout their cancer journey.

References



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