Psychology & Cancer: A Conversation

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AS PSYCHOLOGISTS THAT IS HELPFUL IN CANCER CARE?

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Overview

• Aims
• Intent
• Background about psychology & health
• Major relevant concepts
  – Stress
  – Coping
• Take home message
Aims

#1 – To become more familiar with ways psychologists contribute to cancer care

#2 – Apply these to your own experience
Intent

• Share ideas for about 45 min
• Simplified research
• Interrupt
• YOUR examples*
HISTORY & PSYCHOLOGY

• **Myth**: psychological services are only about mental problems

• Early history tied to psychiatry
  – Psychiatric/mental problems
  – 1960’s & 1970’s: shift to studying health

• Demonstrated value in improving health outcomes
  – Early work with diabetes, cardiac problems; cancer
TWO Major Concepts

• Stress
  – Earlier work: physiological reactions to stress (1930’s)
  – 1960’s/70’s: mind-body interaction

• Coping
  – Guidelines
  – Tools
Stress: Why is it important?

Associated with increased levels of cortisol (primary stress hormone)

Elevated cortisol *can*:

- interfere with learning & memory
- lower immune functioning
- associated wt gain, increased bp, heart disease, risk for emotional reactivity

Mind-body connection poorly understood
Stress: What is it?

Stress = qualities YOU identify in a situation that challenge your resources

Stressor = demands by our environment (internal, external)
- upset the body
- interrupts our well-being
- require action to restore our balance

It’s easy to underestimate the amount of stress YOU have

YOUR emotions = alert YOU to stress
What makes an event stressful?

Threat
- danger, risk

Change

Control

Ambiguity
- uncertainty, vagueness, doubt
Mary’s situation

58yo woman, completed cancer treatment 3yrs ago, scheduled her annual follow-up w her oncologist for Nov 19th, took time off work, is experiencing a new pain, & received a message that her Nov 12th appt with the new nurse practionier needed to be rescheduled. She’s annoyed.

THREAT – does the ‘new’ NP know anything? Does the clinic know anything? Is the pain significant?

CHANGE – new provider/appt, reschedule work

CONTROL – no choice of provider

AMBIGUITY – how soon can appt be rescheduled? How difficult to contact clinic? Why’s? Why seeing NP? What do NP’s really know?
Coping

1. How we manage the demands WE experience

2. Cancer: *external* + *internal* demands.
   - external – changes in life style, plans, finances
   - internal – pain, fatigue, worry, concentration

3. Coping guidelines & tools
   - select to fit a difficult situation
   - overlap
Coping

Guidelines

Tools
Step 1. Guidelines: “I want to -

1. Reduce stress
   - Lower threat
   - Reduce change
   - Increase certainty
   - Strengthen control

2. Take action – act on the problem vs avoiding

3. Manage emotions (don’t ignore)
Step 2. Add coping tools

-- Many tools
-- Select what works for you
-- Select what fits a situation
Coping tools (things I can do!)

1. Seek support
2. Optimism
   - anticipate success
   - check our internal dialogue
     ie, self-talk*
3. Problem solve -
   don’t avoid
4. Manage emotions –
   don’t ignore
4. Seek information
5. Communicate
6. Set goals
7. Invest in your lifestyle
8. Meaning-making
How did Mary use guidelines & tools?

1. Reduce stress
   • Lower uncertainty
     - Googled NP she will see (information)
     - talked w friend who saw this NP (support, information)

2. Take action
   - Called immediately for appt
   - Requested a day she didn’t need to take off work (control)

3. Lower anxiety
   - relax: scheduled massage, yoga, meditation
   - planned dinner w sister (support)
   - told herself she could do this (positive self-talk)

   - Researched NPs as a profession (information)
   - Ask about change to NP (goal)
Re-look at Mary’s techniques

✓ Called friend to talk about her experience  
  (support, communication)

✓ Self-talk: “I’ll make it work” (optimism), “I can handle some anxiety”

✓ Called clinic immediately for appt (don’t avoid)

✓ Went to yoga – exercise = lowers internal tension  
  (managing anxiety)

✓ Asked at appointment about shift to seeing NP  
  (goal setting)

✓ Learned about NP (information seeking)
Take Home Message

Be AWARE of what is stressful & ways to cope.
“I guess in the end, it doesn’t matter what we want. What matters most is what we choose to do with the things we have. . . . we just get to cope”

M. Grant, Author
"The greatest weapon against stress we have is our ability to choose one thought over another."

--Wm James (1842-1910)