

Hope and Healing: The Psychological Side of Cancer Care

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ABSTRACT

Cancer, as both a life-threatening disease and a life-altering experience, carries profound psychological implications for patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals. This article explores the psychological dimensions of cancer, focusing on how the diagnosis, treatment process, and survivorship affect mental health, emotional well-being, and quality of life.

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Cancer and mental health

A majority of the studies have revealed a significant level of psychiatric morbidity among cancer patients. A study conducted on an outpatient cancer population reported 34% to have a clinically significant level of psychological distress, and another study of cancer patients admitted to three centers in U.S.A also revealed similar results. In the Indian setting, 38% of cancer patients were found to have identifiable clinical anxiety or depressive disorder. Earlier studies did not differentiate the psychiatric morbidities related to different types of cancer. Differential effects of other factors like, the impact of the diagnosis, stage of disease and the type of the treatment were also not given due attention in these studies. While in the early stage of the disease it is the impact of the diagnosis and the treatment which have most effects, in advanced disease the physical symptoms and impending death assume importance.

Cancer is considered to invade the mind as much as it does the body!

What is distress in cancer?

Distress is a multifactorial, unpleasant emotional experience of psychological (cognitive, behavioral, emotional), social, and or spiritual nature, that may interfere with the ability to cope effectively with cancer, its physical symptoms and its treatment, which extends from a continuing normal feelings of sadness, fear and vulnerability to disabling problems such as depression, anxiety, panic, social isolation and spiritual crisis. The distress in cancer patients can occur due to a number of factors. Many of these are manifest as concerns in the cancer patients.

Concerns in cancer can be related to:

- Physical symptoms – pain, fatigue, vomiting, cachexia, and distressing symptoms,
- Psychological symptoms – fear, sadness, depression, anxiety, demoralization
- Social concerns – for family and their future, social stigma

- Spiritual concerns – seeking religious, philosophical and spiritual beliefs
- Existential concerns – seeking meaning and purpose of life and disease, and suffering

Depression and depressive disorders

Just because it is natural to feel sad, scared and depressed due to cancer, does not mean these feelings can be ignored.

Persons who develop cancer are expected to feel sad and depressed. This is a natural reaction to the diagnosis of cancer. However, it is important to distinguish between ‘sadness’ and depressive disorder. Depression has a great impact on the cancer patient’s psychological distress, quality of life, and increase in the subjective perception of pain, suicidal ideation and attempts, decreased adherence to treatment, prolonged length of hospital stay, increased family distress and worse prognosis.

Prevalence: Around 20-50% of cancer patients have mental health problems requiring intervention, with at least 25% meeting the criteria for major depressive disorder. The prevalence of major depression has been reported to be 13-40% in various studies.

Psychological treatments:

Supportive psychotherapy or cognitive behaviour therapy can be employed to facilitate ventilation, enhance coping skills and to correct cognitive errors and maladaptive schemas. Recent evidence suggests the use of combined pharmacotherapy and psychological therapies for depressive disorders, with no clear benefit of one over the other.

Hope-finding light in the darkness

Hope is a powerful force in the journey through cancer, hope is not just wishful thinking but a vital part of coping with the uncertainties and challenges that come with the diagnosis. For some, it might be about finding moments of peace and happiness, achieving personal goals

Conclusion

The role of hope and healing in the rest of life cancer patient’s is a crucial aspect of the cancer journey. Hope offers patients and their families a sense of purpose, resilience, and motivation, fostering emotional well-being and often enhancing quality of life. Psychological support, including counseling, support groups, and mindfulness practices, can strengthen this hope, helping individuals cope more effectively with the physical and emotional challenges of the disease. Ultimately, hope becomes a form of healing in itself a means by which patients can find peace, courage, and strength, reaffirming that even in the face of uncertainty, there is meaning and possibility.

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