Psychological well-being and perceived control after a breast cancer diagnosis

Thesis, October 2009
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Part 1. Psychological well-being after a breast cancer diagnosis
1a. Identifying distinct trajectories in psychological distress over illness related stages
1b. Comparing the course of different indicators of emotional well-being over illness related stages

Part 2. Perceived control and psychological adjustment
2a. Examining why personal control over life is adaptive (mediators)?
2b. Examining if a sense of control is adaptive always (moderators)?

Number of papers on psychological issues in breast cancer (PsycINFO)

Study sample
Study design

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Predators
Demographic
Educational level/age
Personal
Personal control over life
Optimism
Neuroticism
Medical
Cancer stage
Type of surgery
Type of adjuvant treatment
Physical complaints due to surgery
Physical complaints due to adjuvant treatment
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Most frequent reported indicators of emotional well-being

- **Depressive symptoms (CES-D)**
  - Low mood and lack of interest in enjoyable activities
  - Triggered by irrevocable loss, associated with hope- and helplessness

- **Anxiety (STAI-6)**
  - Sensation of fear, a state of hyper-arousal
  - Triggered by threat or imminent danger

- **Non-specific distress (GHQ-12)**
  - Constellation of symptoms not specific for a single disorder
  - Multi-factor unpleasant emotional experience
  - Discontinuity in normal functioning

Conclusions

Many women do not report problems after diagnosis or only during active treatment. Some women start to report problems only after treatment or report problems in all stages.

- **Monitor distress in all illness stages**

Trajectories can be predicted by personal characteristics and reported physical complaints due to adjuvant treatment. Women who do not report any distress are well off with respect to both.

- **Easier to predict no distress than to predict distress**

Conclusions

The first emotional response is mostly characterized by anxiety. Non-specific distress is elevated in almost all stages after diagnosis. Depression is relatively uncommon.

> Consequences for screening and interventions

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Perceived personal control over life:
The extent to which one believes that the outcomes of important events and situations in life are under one’s own control instead of being ruled by fate.
Personal control
Adjustment to illness
Behavior

Skinner, 1995
Folkman, 1984
Taylor & Stanton, 2007

primary threat appraisal
worries over the impact breast cancer will have on life (Vinokur, 1990)

secondary appraisal
self-efficacy for coping with cancer (CBI)

Cognitions
Adjustment to illness
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Initial response


Conclusions

a sense of control buffers the impact of a cancer diagnosis because women with a strong sense of control appraise the situation less negative and have more confidence in their coping skills.

a sense of control promotes the regulation of anxiety because women with a high sense of control appraise the situation less negative do not disengage from their social life during treatment.

> Consequences for psychosocial caregivers working with cancer patients.
A general sense of control might be hard to change; cancer-specific appraisal and behavior might not.

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“Fighting” cancer is: not knowing if you will survive, while in the meantime you try to stay on your feet. This takes courage, perseverance and support, but it is totally different from “beating” cancer.

“Cancer survivor” is an undeserved and inappropriate term. A better term would be “lucky bastard”.

“A Armstrong beschrijft zijn gevecht, hoe hij knokte, hoe hij voelde dat hij kankercellen uitkotste. Daarmee zeeg je bijna dat je eigen schuld is als je het niet haalt. Dat je niet hard genoeg hebt gevochten.”

“Toen bij mij kanker werd geconstateerd, ben ik in het ziekenhuis gaan liggen en heb me overgegeven aan de artsen. Je hoort altijd die verhalen dat je positief moet denken, dat je moet knokken om het te overleven. Voor patiënten kan die vechtgedachte heel beklemmend zijn. Er is nooit ook maar een zinszin aan te toonen dat je door positief denken of vechten geneest.”

Interview met Maarten Van der Weijden
NRC 8 mei 2008

A sense of personal control is adaptive...

...at all times, regardless the actual controllability of the situation (Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Armor, 1996; Thompson, 1999)

...only when not disconfirmed by reality (setbacks, deteriorations or a recurrence) (Folkman, 1984; Christensen et al., 1991; Affleck et al., 1987)

Personal control over cure

- There is a lot I can do to control my breast cancer
- What I do, can determine whether I will recover from my breast cancer
- The cure of my breast cancer depends on me
- Nothing I do will affect the cure of my breast cancer*
- I have the power to cure my breast cancer
- My actions will have no effect on the cure of my breast cancer*

Disconfirmation

Bad news after surgery: chemotherapy is necessary

In short:

Does the relation between control over cure an psychological outcomes after surgery depend on the news women receive? Is a sense of control over cure less adaptive when news is bad?
Conclusions
A sense of control over cure did not have a maladaptive effect when women were confronted with bad news after surgery. In the first year after diagnosis illness specific control perceptions might not need to be altered because of potentially maladaptive effects.

Part 1. Psychological well-being after a breast cancer diagnosis
1a. We identified four distinct trajectories in psychological distress over illness related stages
1b. We learned that three indicators of emotional well-being are differentially affected by the illness related stages

Part 2. Perceived control and psychological adjustment
2a. We found cognitive and behavioral mediators that explain the relation between control and well-being.
2b. We found that a strong sense of control over cure does not hurt when one is confronted with bad news after surgery.

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Is a sense of control over cure less adaptive when news is bad? NO