

The Caregiving Journey for Family Members of Relatives With Cancer: How Do They Cope?

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Family caregivers need adequate support from healthcare professionals to complete the demands associated with caregiving with minimal impact on their own health and well-being. An optimal balance of provision of care between family and support services has not been achieved; therefore, this literature review investigates how family caregivers endure and cope with the challenges of caring for an adult relative with cancer. This review considered the characteristics of caregivers and their functioning, the external and internal supports that help them cope, the ongoing challenges as they journey along the caregiving trajectory, the personal costs of caregiving, and how caregivers cope with supporting their family members through to the end of their journeys. The literature provides an abundance of research on the numerous challenges encountered by families living with cancer; however, little research has been conducted on the coping strategies used by family caregivers at specific stages along the illness trajectory that either optimize or hinder personal recovery. Even less information is available on interventions nurses can introduce to ease the caregiving burden. Improving nurses' understanding of the stressors and unmet needs associated with caregiving is fundamental to the development of effective family-focused clinical interventions.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007), cancer is the leading cause of death worldwide and will cause the deaths of as many as 84 million people through 2015. The increasing incidence and mortality of cancer worldwide has led to a greater demand for the provision of health care and palliative care services in all developed countries (WHO, 2002, 2007). According to the WHO (2000), the cost of caring for such a significant number of people has overwhelmed many hospital services and promoted the movement of health care into the community. As a result of such resource constraints, inadequate, intermittently available, and potentially inaccessible services exist, which often fail to meet the needs of family members caring for loved ones with cancer. Consequently, the provision of home care relies heavily on the willingness of a family member to become an informal caregiver to a close relative (WHO, 2000).

Many family caregivers believe that their duty is to be present, to offer emotional support, and to provide their relatives with physical assistance in everyday tasks (Perreault, Fothergill-Bourbonnais, & Fiset, 2004). However, the role of the caregiver often is overwhelming and can be a physically demanding and emotionally draining experience, particularly for caregivers of patients with cancer. The financial constraints and the lack of social support can cause family caregivers to feel helpless and leave them little time to appropriately complete personal respon-

At a Glance

- ◆ Little is known about the coping strategies used by caregivers of adult family members with cancer.
- ◆ The role of the family caregiver often is overwhelming and can be a physically demanding and emotionally draining experience.
- ◆ Caregivers need adequate assistance from nurses and various support services to meet the demands of caregiving.

sibilities (Grunfeld et al., 2004). In addition, caregivers often feel a moral obligation to continue to care for relatives in the home. This obligation is influenced by cultural beliefs, gender role, and perceptions of institutional constraints on care (Sellappah,

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