The Use of Metaphor in Discourse About Cancer: A Review of the Literature

Kristine J. Harrington, MS, RN, BSN, CNL

Imagery and metaphors are used throughout health communication and can be particularly powerful in discourse about cancer. Providers, patients, and the media may use descriptive language to convey the impact and experience of the disease. This article reviews the literature on metaphor in discourse about cancer and its effects. Also, the positive and negative effects of popular cancer-related imagery, such as military and journey metaphors, are explored. Metaphor can be used in nursing, through thoughtful use of imagery, to improve patient-centered care. By noting the imagery used by patients to describe their experiences with cancer, nurses can find a common language for connecting with patients and can advocate for greater awareness and more sensitive communication by other healthcare providers.

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The use of figurative language in discourse about cancer serves multiple purposes. Metaphors make unfamiliar or abstract concepts more accessible by comparing them to ideas already possessed in a cognitive framework (Czechmeister, 1994; Kirklin, 2007; Skott, 2002). The language allows for the reconciliation of “the experiential and the existential” (Czechmeister, 1994, p. 1226) by providing a relationship that creates meaning. Healthcare providers can harness that explanatory power of metaphor when presenting medical concepts that are unfamiliar to their patients (Casarett et al., 2010; Kirklin, 2007; Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004). Physicians who use analogies and metaphors in their illness explanations are considered to possess stronger communication skills by patients (Casarett et al., 2010). Creating a common language can enhance the therapeutic relationship by serving “as the basis for the shared understanding of clinical reality” (Reisfield & Wilson, 2004, p. 4024).

Patients with cancer also bridge communicative gaps by revealing aspects of their illness experiences through metaphor (Bowker, 1996; Domino, Affonso, & Hannah, 1992; Gibbs & Franks, 2002). Creating and sharing metaphors allow patients to make sense of their suddenly chaotic world (Byrne, 2008; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004), communicate emotions or experiences that are otherwise inexpressible (Skott, 2002), or exercise control through the imagery they choose (Bennett, Laidlaw, Dwivedi, Naito, & Gruzelier, 2006; Bowker, 1996). Patients may use multiple, even contradictory, metaphors to contextualize personal narratives, which reflect an internal struggle to reconcile and find meaning in their disrupted lives (Gibbs & Franks, 2002).