

# Depression

## Screening, assessment, and interventions in oncology nursing

Veronica B. Decker, DNP, APRN, PMHCNS-BC, MBA, and Cindy Toftagen, PhD, APRN, AOCNP®, FAANP, FAAN



**BACKGROUND:** A high prevalence of depression exists among individuals with cancer, which negatively affects their health outcomes, quality of life, and adherence to cancer treatment.

**OBJECTIVES:** This article provides an overview and synthesis of depression screening, assessment, and nonpharmacologic treatments to help oncology nurses in their practices.

**METHODS:** Key insights are presented from a synthesized literature review regarding patients with cancer with depression. Resources for patient treatment and nurse training are also provided.

**FINDINGS:** To improve patient outcomes, nurses need to understand and follow a process that addresses the screening, assessment, and nonpharmacologic treatment of depression in patients with cancer.

### KEYWORDS

nonpharmacologic interventions;  
depression; cognitive behavioral therapy

### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/21.CJON.413-421

**IN SOME ONCOLOGY SETTINGS, RATES OF DEPRESSION** are as high as 60% (Caruso et al., 2017; Janberidze et al., 2014). Depressed patients are more likely to be nonadherent to their cancer treatment regimens (Barber et al., 2015; Mausbach et al., 2015) and have poorer health outcomes (Kissane, 2014), increased emergency department visits, diminished quality of life (Hermanto et al., 2020; İzci et al., 2018), and increases in preventable deaths (Zivin et al., 2015). Underdiagnosed or untreated depression can also lead to poorer self-care, resulting in higher alcohol consumption or substance abuse, inadequate diet, lack of physical exercise (Watson & Kissane, 2017), and possibly eventual suicide (Cheung et al., 2017; Kumpula et al., 2019).

Despite these serious risk factors or diminished quality of life, depression is not a typical part of surviving cancer and is often amenable to pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic interventions. In this article, a nursing process and information for screening, assessment, and nonpharmacologic treatment of depression are presented that may be useful to oncology nurses.

## Methods

### Literature Review

A literature review was conducted using Applied Science and Technology Source, CINAHL®, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, MEDLINE®, and PsycINFO® to determine nursing assessment, screening, and nonpharmacologic treatment for individuals with cancer experiencing depression. Search terms included truncated versions and synonyms of the following words: *cancer*, *depression*, *nonpharmacological interventions*, *mindfulness*, *psychotherapy*, and *spirituality*. A total of 13 articles published from 2015 to 2020 (see Table 1) were selected from the 333 aggregated results, in which 248 unduplicated articles were assessed.

### Understanding Depression in Patients With Cancer

**CONTEXT FOR DEPRESSION:** A diagnosis of cancer and its treatment take a tremendous emotional and psychological toll on individuals. As patients strive to manage during this time, various medical, psychological, and emotional factors deserve attention.

Medically, patients are dealing with cancer symptoms, side effects of treatment, and prognosis (Kim et al., 2018). Psychologically, when a patient receives a cancer diagnosis, a complicated emotional response occurs, which can happen all at once or over time. Common emotional reactions include anger, anxiety and fear, guilt, shame, and sadness (Levenson, 2019). All these responses can contribute to depression (Li et al., 2017; Niazi et al., 2020), and limited coping ability and adjustment challenges may increase a desire