We are sharing a model that we have used to increase our understanding of the impact of cancer on individuals and families and to assist us as we work with these individuals to live with the challenges they encounter. This article is not a synthesis of the research conducted in the area of self-concept or the literature currently published. It does integrate research, theory, and practice experience to enhance understanding of cancer-related changes in self-concept. The origin of our use of the proposed model dates back to the mid-1970s, when we were involved in “Make Today Count,” a support group for individuals encountering life-threatening illness. Most of the individuals we had the privilege of working with were dealing with cancer; the impact of their cancer molded our thinking, but our real-life encounter with stroke taught us firsthand that the model has wider applications. In fact, it was our personal experience with the changes associated with stroke during those earlier days that motivated us to pursue the use of such a model. At this time, the model will be presented within the context of cancer and its treatment. However, the model’s application or use with individuals experiencing other health-related problems should be apparent. In fact, nurses working in medical-surgical practice arenas who see not only patients with cancer, but also patients with a wide variety of diagnoses, will be able to generalize much of the model to other situations.

Introduction

The impact of cancer frequently is a topic of discussion by and for healthcare professionals. We acknowledge that the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, as well as living with the disease, have the potential to cause a tremendous effect on quality of life. Yet, do we adequately grasp the magnitude of the impact for the individuals actually experiencing it? Cancer frequently is identified as the most dreaded diagnosis an individual can receive. In addition, even though we boast tremendous advances in treatment, improved cure rates, and longer survival with the disease, cancer continues to be associated with death. Life after a cancer diagnosis is perceived as involving pain, suffering, disfigurement, and similarly negative consequences. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the majority of the current treatments, many survivors of the initial experience with cancer find themselves having to deal with long-term side effects or consequences. Although the survivorship movement is making great strides, the magnitude of these problems has yet to be fully appreciated by healthcare professionals. Because cancer treatments always are changing in our fight to overcome the disease, the long-term effects scenario also is ever-changing. Often, by the time we have a large enough cadre of individuals far enough out from a given treatment protocol to allow us to adequately document the long-term negative sequelae, the treatments have changed to improve short-term results. In addition, individual disease and treatment trajectories vary with a wide range of combinations over time. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to obtain a clear picture of who can be expected to experience which long-term consequences. One fact, however, is certain—life will never be quite the same as it was before a cancer diagnosis.

Self-Concept

A number of terms are used when we engage in discussions about the impact of cancer on the lives of individuals for whom we have the opportunity to provide care. Some of the terms used frequently include self-concept, body image, self-image, and self-esteem. In our model, we use the term self-concept as the mental picture we have of ourselves and how we feel about that picture. It is as though in our mind’s eye we actually are able to “look” at ourselves and make an evaluation. At any one point in our lives, we actually have multiple identities—not in a psychiatric or pathologic sense, but in terms of roles. For example, although our roles as nurses often may seem to be encroaching on all of our existence, simultaneously we are spouses, parents, friends, nurturers of others, gardeners, house cleaners, etc. The roles involve relationships with different individuals and a variety of expectations. Our feelings concerning these various roles fluctuate constantly.

Effect of Cancer on Self-Concept

When an unexpected and undesirable event such as a diagnosis of cancer occurs, it has the potential to trigger an almost “domino-like” effect in multiple areas of the lives of the people involved. Cancer has an effect not only on the individual with the diagnosis, but also on family members and friends. Changes that affect self-concept alter how we view ourselves, our situation, and the people around us.