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

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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.

Health Communication Tool

The use of figurative language in discourse about cancer serves multiple purposes. Metaphors make unfamiliar or abstract concepts more accessible to the public, whereas patients and family members use metaphor to share their illness experiences (Gibbs & Franks, 2002). This article will review the literature on metaphor in discourse about cancer and the current use of metaphor in cancer-related health communication. Popular metaphors will be explored, particularly images of cancer treatment as a war or journey. Also, in an effort to encourage the use of imagery and figurative language for improving patient-centered care, the significance of metaphor to nursing care will be discussed.