

Partners of Cancer Survivors at Risk for Depression, Other Quality of Life Issues Over the Long Term

A new study shows that partners of cancer survivors suffer many of the same stresses as cancer survivors themselves, but receive less care and attention for them. The results of the study, which examined long-term quality of life issues for the partners of patients who received blood and marrow transplants (BMT) as part of their cancer treatment, are being published online April 10 in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* (JCO).

The study found that while partners of cancer survivors reported better physical health and less fatigue than cancer survivors an average of seven years after cancer treatment, they experienced equal levels of mental health impairment. The study further found that while similar numbers of partners and survivors suffered from clinical depression (20% vs. 22%), depressed partners were less likely than depressed survivors to receive mental health treatment (34% vs. 58%). Partners also reported less social support, spiritual well-being, marital satisfaction, and more loneliness than survivors. Unlike survivors, partners reported little positive personal change occurring as a result of the experience with cancer.

Previous research has found that the partners of cancer patients experience as much if not more anxiety, distress, and depression than patients themselves. However, this is the first study to examine the very long-term quality of life outcomes of partners of patients who have successfully been treated for cancer.

Researchers focused on cancer survivors who had received BMT as part of their treatment, since little is known about the long-term quality of life outcomes for these patients. BMT is used to treat an increasing number of cancers, and approximately 40,000 BMTs are performed each year.

What does this mean for patients?

The study authors emphasize the importance of acknowledging that cancer occurs in the context of a family that is also profoundly affected by the experience. Partners and caregivers of cancer survivors who experience depression or other quality of life issues should know that their experiences are not uncommon, and should be encouraged to discuss their concerns and seek out support.

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