The Experience of Imagery as a Post-Treatment Intervention in Patients With Breast Cancer: Program, Process, and Patient Recommendations

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Purpose/Objectives: To better understand the common themes of women participating in an imagery program designed to improve quality of life (QOL).

Research Approach: Qualitative.

Setting: Classroom setting at Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage.

Participants: 10 women with a confirmed diagnosis of breast cancer who had completed conventional care participated in a six-class, eight-week-long imagery program titled Envision the Rhythms of Life® (ERL).

Methodologic Approach: Focus group audio recordings and notes were interpreted with the Krueger focus group method and confirmed by an outside evaluator.

Main Research Variables: Breast cancer survivors’ descriptions of imagery practice and experience as they created passive, active, and targeted imagery.

Findings: Participants reported the importance of engaging passive and active imagery, letting targeted imagery take on a life of its own, performing homework, understanding the science, practicing, hearing imagery stories, engaging all the senses, trusting imagery, and group interaction. Imagination practice improved mood state.

Conclusions: When delivered by expert imagery trainers in collaboration with oncology nurses, ERL can improve breast cancer survivors’ QOL. The present study is one of a few reports that evaluated survivors’ imagery experiences from a clinical trial and produced significant QOL improvements.

Interpretation: The present study provides oncology nurses understanding of the psychological risks faced by breast cancer survivors after completion of primary care and explains the critical need for post-treatment programs for survivors dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, or high levels of stress.

Key Points . . .

➤ After completing primary care, many cancer survivors suffer late- and long-term effects of their cancer treatments, which negatively affect psychological, social, vocational, and spiritual well-being as well as quality of life (QOL).

➤ Psychological dysfunction and low QOL can affect physical health, including immune function.

➤ Clinically tested imagery programs can significantly improve QOL and psychological well-being.

In 2006, a report on the quality of life (QOL) of cancer survivors revealed a population of more than 10 million survivors in the United States. Women with a history of breast cancer were the largest group of survivors, comprising 22% of the population. The survivors remain largely understudied and lost to follow-up (Hewitt, Greenfield, & Stovall, 2006).

Three trends emerged from Hewitt et al.’s (2006) report: Cancer can become a chronic condition that must be managed for a lifetime; although life is preserved, many survivors suffer...