Working Through Grief and Loss: Oncology Nurses’ Perspectives on Professional Bereavement

Jennifer Wenzel, PhD, RN, CCM, Maya Shaha, PhD, RN, Rachel Klimmek, BS, RN, OCN®, and Sharon Krumm, PhD, RN

The global demand for highly skilled, experienced oncology nurses continues to grow because of increased disease incidence and improved cancer survivorship. However, predicted oncology workforce shortages may negatively affect both the quantity and quality of cancer care, including related areas such as research, healthcare access, and survivorship in the 21st century. To date, staff and faculty shortages have decreased the number of nurses receiving specialized oncology education and training (Institute of Medicine, 2009).

In spite of growing evidence that experienced oncology nurses contribute to high-quality cancer care and improved patient outcomes, administrators in oncology settings commonly face multiple challenges to nurse retention, including inadequate staffing levels, high patient acuity requiring complex care delivery, and long work hours (Buerhaus, Donelan, DesRoches, Lamkin, & Mallory, 2001). Caring relationships fostered by oncology nurses also may be associated with emotional burden (Showalter, 2010; Walton & Alvarez, 2010; Yoder, 2010) that can be exacerbated by increased workloads, heightened client acuity and complexity, and repeated contacts with patients who are suffering. This burden may become overwhelming during situations in which nurses lack experience, skills, or sufficient professional and social support to manage their own psychological health (Sabo, 2008). Nurses providing care to patients who are suffering or actively dying also may experience trust issues, loss of independence, and decreased capacity for intimacy, as well as loss of control (Figley, 1995), anxiety, anger, and irritability (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Stressful events experienced by nurses caring for patients in life-threatening situations also can lead to intrusive imagery, defined as “fragments of specific autobiographical events or imaginal extensions of such events that predominantly possess sensory qualities and enter awareness suddenly and unintentionally” (Boelen & Hunjens, 2008, p. 217). Therefore, nurses may relive and re-experience traumatic events repeatedly in their minds. Those psychological disturbances can have personal and professional consequences