

# The Meaning of Hope and Social Support in Patients Receiving Chemotherapy

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To explore and describe the meaning of hope and social support in patients receiving chemotherapy.

**Research Approach:** Descriptive, qualitative.

**Setting:** One ambulatory care oncology center in the midwestern United States.

**Participants:** 6 men and 8 women with a mean age of 63.6 years.

**Methodologic Approach:** Semistructured interviews were conducted while patients underwent chemotherapy. Interviewers asked open-ended questions to elicit each participant's personal meaning of hope and social support. Meticulous notes were taken during each interview. The data were analyzed with an editing style that used codes to sort and organize meaningful statements. The statements were categorized and themes were developed to give meaning to the data.

**Main Research Variables:** Hope and social support.

**Findings:** Four themes emerged during data analysis. Focusing on the Bigger Picture represented adaptation to the diagnosis and learning to live beyond it. Taking Cover in the Storm signified sheltering oneself from the negative aspects of cancer. Keeping It Normal signified participants' desire to continue activities as they had prior to their illness. Reaching Out/Not in This Alone illustrated the need to seek faith, treatment potential, and others, including healthcare providers, for hope and support.

**Conclusions:** Hope aids in overall health and well-being. Support from family, friends, and healthcare providers was valuable to participants as they dealt with their disease and treatment.

**Interpretation:** Hope and social support are multidimensional with individualized meanings. Healthcare providers can teach proactive strategies to shelter patients from the negative aspects of cancer and chemotherapy. Healthcare providers are valuable sources of support and hope for the patients in their care.

## Key Points . . .

- Methods by which care is delivered to patients with cancer undergoing chemotherapy can be extremely influential on the patients' levels of hope and perceptions of support.
- Nurses can enhance care to patients with cancer undergoing chemotherapy by developing and maximizing available support networks.
- Hope and social support help provide strength for patients with cancer.

Herth, 2002; Herth, 2000; Rustoen & Wiklund, 2000). Similarly, social support helps individuals adjust to stressful life events (Flanagan & Holmes, 2000; Papadopoulos & Lees, 2004) such as a cancer diagnosis. Hope and social support have been explored extensively in the nursing research literature with different populations in various stages of health and illness. Although researchers have studied issues related to individual aspects of cancer care (e.g., palliative care, gender, phase of illness), qualitative exploration of the meaning of hope and social support on participants with cancer in various stages and actively undergoing chemotherapy was not found in the published literature. The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to explore and describe the meaning of hope and social support in patients with cancer undergoing chemotherapy. Using participants of both genders with varying cancer diagnoses and stages can provide rich descriptions of the phenomena. Results can help nurses better assist patients with cancer undergoing chemotherapy to transition through a health crisis and enhance their quality of life.

The American Cancer Society ([ACS], 2008) estimated that about one of every two men and one of every three women in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime, and more than 1.4 million new case will be diagnosed in 2008. A cancer diagnosis often results in fear, uneasiness, and devastation, and affected patients undergo physical, emotional, and social changes. With the additional effects of chemotherapy treatment, patients with cancer experience overwhelming upheaval in their lives that can be extremely difficult to navigate alone. Changes in functional status can alter relationships as interdependence increases and individuals facing cancer may long for reassurance and peace.

Hope has been found to help patients adapt to and provide meaning in illness, maintain a high level of well-being, and give direction and a reason for being (Saleh & Brockopp, 2001). It also is important in coping with various phases of illness (Benzein, Norberg, & Saveman, 2001; Cutcliffe &

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