

Integrative Literature Review on Psychological Distress and Coping Strategies Among Survivors of Adolescent Cancer

Hyewon Shin, RN, PhD, Robin Bartlett, RN, PhD,
and Jennie C. De Gagne, PhD, DNP, RN, NP-BC, CNE, ANEF, FAAN

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION: Cancer survivors, particularly those diagnosed in adolescence, are faced with physical, mental, and emotional stressors associated with the disease and its treatment. These stressors add to the demand placed on survivors' already taxed coping skills. This article reviews the literature on psychological distress experienced by survivors diagnosed with cancer during adolescence and the coping strategies they employed.

LITERATURE SEARCH: Three electronic databases (CINAHL®, PsycINFO®, PubMed®) were searched, and 19 studies were selected. Garrard's matrix method guided this integrative review.

DATA EVALUATION: Gough's weight of evidence framework was used to evaluate each study.

SYNTHESIS: Analysis revealed important findings about the types of coping strategies used by adolescents during and after cancer treatment and the impact of each on levels of psychological distress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: Healthcare providers, who regularly assess for negative thoughts and unmet needs among survivors, may identify symptoms of psychological distress, intervene early, and facilitate better outcomes for their patients. Patient-centered interventions aimed at coping with psychological distress are most helpful.

KEYWORDS adolescents with cancer; psychological distress; coping strategies; early intervention

ONF, 47(5), E131–E148.

DOI 10.1188/20.ONF.E131-E148

Advances in cancer treatment have increased the overall five-year survival rate to almost 85% (Howlader et al., 2020). However, cancer remains the second leading cause of death for children and adolescents (Howlader et al., 2020). About 5,000–6,000 adolescents aged 15–19 years are diagnosed with cancer annually, and about 500–600 adolescents die from cancer each year (American Cancer Society, 2020). Adolescents are aware of these mortality statistics, and they experience fear and anxiety about their chance of surviving the disease, according to national survey data (Hølge-Hazelton et al., 2016). Because adolescence is a time of dramatic growth in various domains, including physical, cognitive, psychological, and social (Smith et al., 2013), adolescents with cancer face unique challenges in coping with life-threatening illness. Navigating the typical changes of adolescence is difficult; adding cancer-related psychological distress, powerlessness, and insecurity about the future places a heavy demand on teenagers' coping skills (Ander et al., 2018). To effectively manage stressors, patients with cancer need to learn and employ personal coping strategies, including leaning on others for social support.

Coping is defined as a dynamic process of making cognitive and behavioral choices to reduce stress during cancer treatment; this definition is based on a framework by Folkman and Lazarus (1988). Coping mediates the impact of stressors on physical health and encourages the psychological adjustment that takes place after a cancer diagnosis (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During the coping process, primary and secondary appraisals occur. Primary appraisals involve developing strategies to directly change the source of the stress using problem-focused or