Quality of Life (QoL) in Cancer Survivors

Achieving Quality of Life (QoL) has common issues for, with, and by cancer survivors and their caregivers.

Stage 1: LIVING WITH CANCER
Quality of life concerns begins following the new diagnosis of cancer, when an oncologist is selected to manage cancer care

- What do we mean by QoL?
  - As defined by the American Cancer Society (1) quality of life is a broad multidimensional concept that considers all aspects of person’s life:
    - physical
    - emotional
    - social
    - spiritual well-being
  - The four well-being spheres listed above are defined in more detail as follows(1):
    - **Physical well-being** is the degree to which symptoms and side effects of treatment, such as pain, fatigue and poor sleep quality affect the ability of a cancer survivor to perform daily activities.
    - **Emotional or psychological well-being** refers to the ability to maintain control over anxiety, depression, fear of cancer recurrence, and problems with memory and concentration.
    - **Social well-being** primarily addresses relationships with family and friends, including intimacy and sexuality. Social well-being is also affected by employment, insurance, and financial concerns.
    - **Spiritual well-being** is derived from being able to draw meaning from the cancer experience, either in the context of religion, or through maintaining hope and resilience in the face of uncertainty about one’s future health.

Stage 2: LIVING THROUGH CANCER
Quality of Life issues continue after the primary curative treatment ends when most cancer survivors transfer to the recovery phase of survivorship

- The good news is:
  - Although QoL may decline considerably during and shortly after active cancer treatment, which is totally understandable, most disease-free cancer survivors of 5 years or more report a QoL that is comparable to those who have had no history of cancer (1).
  - However, many survivors continue to suffer, especially those who have had more aggressive and invasive treatments. As such, these survivors report poorer functioning and QoL in the long term.
  - Those who were diagnosed with childhood or young adult cancers, as well as those who are members of racial/ethnic minorities and those with lower social-economic status have a greater difficulty with regaining QoL.

Stage 3: LIVING BEYOND CANCER
Quality of Life issues continue to be addressed during long-term survivorship (the last stage) of living beyond cancer, which can be both stressful, as well as, hopeful, as cancer survivors find a “new normal.”

- Age is also an important predictor of QoL for cancer survivors.
  - Those who were diagnosed at a younger age tend to have poorer emotional functioning; whereas those who were of older age at diagnosis suffer with poorer physical functioning.
  - Unfortunately many survivors of childhood cancer have cognitive or functional deficits that can impair their ability to successfully complete their education and find employment, which can impact psychological well-being and results in lower QoL.
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• Risk of recurrence of their original cancer or the development of a second primary tumor, or new tumor is a major worry for all cancer survivors.
  - When a tumor grows near the site of the original cancer, it is known as a recurrence or a metastasis.
  - A second primary cancer is the occurrence of a new cancer that is biologically distinct from the original cancer.
  - The risk of developing second cancers varies by the type of the first cancer, the treatment received, and the age at diagnosis.
  - As a whole, cancer survivors have a small (15%) risk of developing second primary cancers, though some may be at much higher risk.
  - The overall risk of developing a second cancer is highest for survivors of childhood cancer, those who were diagnosed before age 20.

• Healthy behaviors are especially important for cancer survivors, for regaining and improving health through lifestyle choices.
  - Helping cancer survivors embrace these behaviors can actually reduce the risk of recurrence.
  - As an example, post-treatment physical activity has been associated with increased recurrence-free and overall survival, whereas overweight and obesity have been consistently associated with poorer survival for many cancers.
  - Also, continued smoking after cancer treatment increases the risk of recurrence as well as smoking-related second cancers.
  - In addition to decreasing recurrences, healthy behaviors may also improve survivor overall functioning and QoL.

• Exercise has been demonstrated in clinical trials to improve heart and lung function and reduce cancer-related fatigue among survivors.
  - The American Cancer Society has developed a detailed guide for physical activity and nutrition during and after cancer treatment[10].
  - The American Cancer Society can also provide day-to-day help and emotional support, help with the health care system, assistance with smoking cessation, as well as support with general survivorship issues at http://www.cancer.org/survivorshipcenter.
  - Adopting and maintaining healthy behaviors is the focus of the West Texas Cancer Survivors Network - Phase 2 outreach program and implementation includes sending tailored healthy behavior messages to enrolled cancer survivors who have agreed to participate in our healthy behaviors intervention.

References:

Additional West Texas Cancer Survivors Network- Phase 2 Fact Sheets will address strategies for
  • DIET AND NUTRITION      • MAINTAINING HEALTHY WEIGHT      • PHYSICAL ACTIVITY