Managing Fear of Recurrence After Breast Cancer Treatment

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Definition: Fear of Recurrence

• “the fear of cancer returning or progressing”
  – heightened health related anxiety
  – symptom vigilance
  – Worries about risk of recurrence
  – Fears of shortened lifespan
  – Overall disruptions in survivorhood quality of life

Vickberg SMJ. Ann Behav Med 2003
Prevalence: How Common is Fear of Recurrence?

• 25%-99% of survivors endorse experiencing
• 40% endorse as dominant concern
• 50% endorse unmet needs in dealing with fear of recurrence

— Stanton et al, Cancer 2005;
Higher Rates of Fear of Recurrence

- Lower age
- Difficult treatment
- Persistence of symptoms after treatment
- Pain, Anxiety, Depression
- Recent Completion of Treatment

Fear of Recurrence in Survivorship Trajectory

- End of Treatment/ Transition to Survivorship
- During Survivorhood – “Anxiety Triggers”
Transition to Survivorship

• Transitions in sense of control, predictability, responsibility

• Loss of Treatment Team

• Entry into New Normal

• Anxiety about reducing Risks for Recurrence

• Desire to maintain Gains from cancer experience
Triggers in Long Term Survivorship

• Disruptions in Equilibrium brought on by expected or unexpected events

• Routine Scans, Appointments
• New Symptoms, New Testing
• Anniversaries
• News from Outside—media reports, cancer stories
Strategies to Manage Fear of Recurrence Anxiety
Communication with Health Care Team

• Ask to be educated about survivorship
• Parameters of Care
  – frequency, testing, goals
  – How to handle new symptoms/worries
• Engage with your PMD

higher fear of recurrence in women who engaged in high health surveillance without accessing healthcare support.

» Thewes et al. Support Cancer Care 2012
Communication with Family/Friends

• Engage in survivorship education
  - attending appts, scans
• Plan celebrations according to your timeline
• Prepare for anniversaries, scans and stresses
• Talk about “new normal”
• Have someone(s) who understands

  – Women with less social support exp greater fear of recurrence

Managing Triggers

• Plan for expected triggers
  -distraction, meditation, medication

• Discuss new symptom management with team

• News from Outside
  – Know own story, allow for sadness/distress, seek support
Professional Care Needed

• Symptoms of anxiety, sadness, worry that persist several weeks w/o improving

• Symptoms that impact functioning:
  sleep disturbance
  trouble concentrating
  agitation/fatigue

• Symptoms that may be worsened by hormonal treatments
Set Realistic Goals for Risk Reduction

• Discuss targets for risk reduction/ improved health
• Avoid all or nothing thinking
• Commit to realistic goals

_Fear of recurrence neg correlated with higher levels of confidence in ability to engage in healthy behaviors._

_McGinty et al. Psycho-Oncology 2012._
Fear of Recurrence in Context of Cancer Experience

• Fear of recurrence can’t be eliminated
• Connected to knowledge of vulnerability
• Burden to be managed and....
• Reminder of what is precious.