A Dyadic Approach to Coping With Women's Cancers

A review of

Helping Couples Cope with Women's Cancers: An Evidence-Based Approach for Practitioners

by Karen Kayser and Jennifer L. Scott


Reviewed by Leslie B. Rosen

Helping Couples Cope with Women's Cancer: An Evidence-Based Approach for Practitioners takes the reader on the journey that women and their intimate partners face starting with the initial diagnosis of breast or gynecological cancer through treatment and beyond (i.e., cancer checkups, recurrence, and end-stage cancer). Prior to writing the book, the authors each developed treatment protocols to help women on two continents cope with their cancer and its sequelae. Karen Kayser (2005) developed the Partners in Coping Program in Boston, Massachusetts, whereas Jennifer Scott (Scott, Halford, & Ward, 2004) developed Can COPE in Queensland, Australia. Both programs are geared toward helping the woman and her closest support person (generally her intimate partner) adjust to living with cancer across a range of quality-of-life issues such as improved mood, supportive communication, body image, and sexual intimacy. Though written for clinicians who are
treating women diagnosed with cancer and their partners, it is accessible for students as well as the women and partners themselves.

**Dyadic Coping**

Both authors' work is supported by a line of research that indicates that satisfaction with partner support is predictive of good psychological adjustment to cancer (Hannum, Giese-Davis, Harding, & Hatfield, 1991; Kuijer et al., 2000; Ptacek, Ptacek, & Dodge, 1994). The underlying theory of these treatment protocols is that one partner's mood can affect the other partner's mood as well as affect each of their long-term levels of adjustment. Furthermore,

higher conflict in the relationship was related to a lower mood disturbance. While this seems counterintuitive, conflict was also positively correlated with marital satisfaction. These findings suggest that relationships in which spouses do not withdraw when there are differences, but confront them directly, can be productive. (pp. 46–47)

Following a diagnosis of cancer, intervening at the couple level allows the strengths of the couple relationship to help each member of the couple work through their distress with effective communication and mutual support.

The book is organized in two parts: The first part deals with assessment of the couple's coping and the second introduces the interventions that have been found effective at various stages of adjustment following diagnosis with breast or gynecological cancer. Many assessment tools are discussed, and references are given so that the reader can access the tools for use in clinical practice. The interventions are cognitive behavioral techniques specifically tailored to dealing with issues faced by couples in which the woman has been diagnosed with breast cancer or gynecological cancer. The sessions discussed allow the couple to learn how to integrate the cancer into their daily lives, with special emphasis placed on developing cognitive coping skills and supportive communication, enhancing sexuality and body image, informing children of a mother's illness, and transitioning back to living without active cancer treatments.

**Themes and Applicability**

The book assumes that anyone reading it has a physiological and psychological understanding of women's cancers. Although the book uses breast cancer and gynecological cancer as examples, much of what is described could be used for other types of cancers or
life-threatening illnesses. The techniques could also be used, with some modification, with couples in which the man or husband has cancer. As the book relates, the clinician would need to understand the basics of the underlying illness, yet the techniques could be used in similar fashion with other cancers. For example, if the man has prostate cancer many of the issues would remain the same; however, the body image and sexual intimacy issues would shift to a male rather than a female perspective. Likewise the issues surrounding telling young children about a parent's cancer would be similar.

The one area where the book could use strengthening is with the topic of dealing with the issues of death as well as individual differences between the woman and her supportive partner. The authors indicate that both of their programs were created to work with couples facing and surviving cancer. Some of the issues that emerge as death looms are highlighted, yet the ways to alter many of their techniques for dealing with these issues are not discussed. The authors are to be commended for broaching the subject, yet they need to do more to indicate how their techniques may need to be modified to cover the issues of death and dying. Also, more discussion could have been devoted to the self-care needs of the clinicians who treat these couples, an important topic that is often not fully elaborated. The organization of the book is such that the tougher issues are generally relegated to the “what if…” portion that ends each of the chapters in which troubling behavior is mentioned and then dealt with in one or two sentences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Helping Couples Cope with Women's Cancers* delivers a family systems/cognitive behavioral approach to dealing with the stressors felt by a woman who is diagnosed with breast or gynecological cancer and her intimate partner. The types and pace of various sessions are nicely laid out, specifying how to approach sensitive subjects as well as how to troubleshoot when one or both partners have trouble overcoming particular issues. The case examples that follow each technique nicely summarize how the techniques might affect a couple as they struggle with integrating the cancer experience into their everyday lives. This book would make an excellent text for a graduate-level health psychology course dealing with the psychology of illness. It also would be good for a clinician who may not specialize in treating cancer patients, yet finds her- or himself treating a client who, during the course of her treatment, may receive a diagnosis of cancer. This book could guide such a professional through the issues that may arise during the continued treatment of the client. For the clinician who regularly treats clients with serious health concerns, this book is a current, up-to-date refresher on the literature of how illness affects the individuals diagnosed as well as the loved ones who support and help care for them.
References


