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Research Week 2024

Effects of cancer survivor and caregiver age, social network size, and member heterogeneity on perceived support

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Keywords

Cancer survivorship, caregiver, social network, social support

Abstract

Background

Cancer survivors' and caregivers' social networks provide support for managing stress and navigating daily life. Larger, more diverse networks typically confer more stress-buffering connections and resources. Aging, chronic illness, and caregiving are associated with diminishing network size and heterogeneity, yet how these factors relate to perceived support is not well-studied in this population.

Objective

To examine the association of survivor and caregiver age, network size, and member heterogeneity (age, relationships) with perceived support.

Methods

We recruited cancer survivors (n=32) ≥18 years old, who received a new cancer diagnosis in the past 5 years and identified a caregiver (n=32) ≥18 years who also agreed to participate (N=64). Participants reported demographic data for themselves and 7-20 network members at baseline and completed the Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (FSSQ). We calculated correlations and used multiple regression to examine associations among age, support, network size, and network heterogeneity based on members' ages, and ratio of relatives/non-relative relationships.

Results

Participants were mostly white (n=60, 93.8%) women (n=39, 60.9%); mean age was 43 years (SD=17.2, range=19-76). Participant age was weakly negatively correlated with network age heterogeneity, $r_s(62) = -0.336$, $p = 0.007$, and support, $r_s(62) = 0.282$, $p = 0.024$. Network size, member age- and relationship=heterogeneity were not significant predictors of perceived support ($p = .17$, R2adj = 0.03), contributing 0.3% support variance. Network age heterogeneity, however, contributed significantly to the model ($\beta = 1.01$, $p = .04$), indicating that support increased by 1.3% for every one-unit increase in network age heterogeneity.

Conclusions

While selected network characteristics did not predict support in our sample, findings suggest that age-diverse networks may confer more support while older participants reported both less age diversity and less support within their networks. The complex relationships among age, network diversity, and support, and implications for intervention, bear further study.