Interpersonal Factors and Adjustment to Cancer: Social Support and Unsupportive Responses

Social Support

- Many definitions/conceptualizations and even more measures

- Perspectives/approaches
  - Received/enacted support – support actually received from others
  - Perceived available support – perceptions of types of support that would be available if needed
  - Satisfaction with support – evaluations of support quality or availability

- Support functions/types (examples)
  - Emotional support – (esteem support, reassurance of worth)
  - Instrumental/tangible – (practical support, material assistance)
  - Informational support – (advice/guidance, cognitive guidance)
  - Companionship support
  - Validation – (feedback, social comparison)

- Providers
  - Social network in the aggregate
  - Specific people – e.g., family, friends, spouse/partner, health care provider

- Context
  - Global/general – not specific to a particular stressful event
  - Stressor-specific

Unsupportive Responses from Others

- Not as many conceptualizations or measures

- Many terms
  - social strain
  - social undermining
  - negative social exchange
  - negative social support (?)

- Distinguish from related constructs that don’t focus on specific behavior of others
  - interpersonal conflict
  - social constraints (Lepore & Helgeson, 1998) – feeling uncomfortable/inhibited in discussing their thoughts/feelings about the stressor with others
  - the number of individuals in the person’s network who are a source of negative/upsetting interactions
  - helpfulness/unhelpfulness continuum – rate each network member
Some questions that parallel how to approach conceptualizing social support

- Types
- Providers
- Context
  - Global/general
    - Test of Negative Social Exchange (Ruehlman & Karoly, 1991)
  - Stressor-specific
    - Unsupportive Social Interactions Inventory (Ingram, Betz, Mindes, Schmitt, & Smith, 2001)
      - Distancing
      - Minimizing
      - Bumbling
      - Blaming

Themes from Research

- Social support and unsupportive responses tend to be weakly correlated
  - not opposite ends of a single continuum
- Some studies: Compared to social support, unsupportive responses were more consistently and more strongly associated with distress, health-related quality of life.
- When possible, assess social support and unsupportive responses
  - implications for interventions

Current Research at Massey on Interpersonal Factors Adjustment to Cancer

- Social support and unsupportive responses received by people recently diagnosed with cancer (initial study: colorectal cancer)
  - received from the “most important person” and “other family and friends”
- Primary aim
  - Examine association of both social support and unsupportive responses with outcomes over time
    - distress (depressive symptoms)
    - positive affect
    - health-related quality of life
    - posttraumatic personal growth
    - health behaviors (fat and fiber intake)

Question

- Consider any of the 4 theories of health behavior that we discussed
  - Role of social support?
  - Role of unsupportive responses?