Working Toward Normalcy Post-Treatment: A Qualitative Study of Older Adult Breast and Prostate Cancer Survivors

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Cancer survivors may take months or years to fully adjust to life following cancer treatment, and they may never do so (Buzaglo et al., 2013). The Institute of Medicine published a landmark report that highlighted the depth and breadth of survivors’ unmet needs post-treatment (Hewitt, Greenfield, & Stovall, 2006). Because of the influence of this report and the research it inspired, cancer is increasingly viewed as a chronic condition that requires medical, rehabilitative, and psychosocial support well after treatment has ended (Viswanathan et al., 2014). As the population grows, so does the demand for high-quality survivorship care that addresses the needs of increasing numbers of aging cancer survivors who are living longer following cancer treatment (Siegel et al., 2012).

Transitional survivorship, sometimes referred to as a period of re-entry, has been defined as a phase of adjustment that immediately follows completion of primary cancer treatment (Ganz, 2009; Mullan, 1985). During this phase, cancer survivors may continue to perform numerous illness-related tasks associated with adjuvant treatments, rehabilitative therapies, and ongoing cancer surveillance while managing their everyday lives (Klimmek & Wenzel, 2012). In addition to these activities, transitional survivorship involves recovering a sense of wholeness, reconstituting identity, and adjusting life plans in the wake of cancer and its consequences (McCann, Illingworth, Wengström, Hubbard, & Kearney, 2010; Reeve, Lloyd-Williams, Payne, & Dowrick, 2010). Managing life in this new normal during cancer recovery can be considered a form of work involving effort, resources, and tasks on the part of survivors and those who support them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how older adult survivors of early-stage breast and prostate cancer manage the work of recovery from primary breast and prostate cancer treatment.

Methodologic Approach

The analysis reported in the current article was embedded within a larger randomized, controlled trial of...