Development and Evaluation of Targeted Psychological Skills Training for Oncology Nurses in Managing Stressful Patient and Family Encounters

Lara Traeger, PhD, Elyse R. Park, PhD, MPH, Nora Sporn, BA, Jennifer Repper-DeLisi, RN, MSN, Mary Susan Convery, MSW, LICSW, Michelle Jacobo, PhD, and William F. Pirl, MD, MPH

Studies of the cumulative effects of stress in oncology nursing have pointed to outcomes such as burnout and compassion fatigue. Burnout reflects exhaustion in the context of work demands (Freudenberger, 1974), whereas compassion fatigue has been used to identify the personal costs over time of caring for others who are suffering (Figley, 2002; Joinson, 1992). Oncology nurses report high rates of both phenomena (Edmonds, Lockwood, Bezjak, & Nyhof-Young, 2012; Hooper, Craig, Janvrin, Wetsel, & Reimels, 2010; Ksiazek, Stefaniak, Stadnyk, & Ksiazek, 2011; Potter et al., 2010; Trufelli et al., 2008). In medical settings, work-related stress has been associated with poorer well-being (Taylor, Graham, Potts, Richards, & Ramirez, 2005), lower confidence (Travado, Grassi, Gil, Ventura, & Martins, 2005), and higher risk for medical errors (West et al., 2006). Oncology nurses with higher stress also may be more likely to consider leaving for positions outside of cancer care (Demirci et al., 2010), which is an important concern given the limited numbers of nurses with oncology training.

The evidence is inconsistent regarding whether interventions may prevent or reduce the effects of cumulative stress among oncology nurses. Intensive and nontargeted psychological training may decrease stress (Delvaux et al., 2004); however, the time and resources required to deliver or attend those programs limit feasibility in many practice settings. A number of pilot trials have tested brief, structured programs to reduce burnout among oncology nurses, with evidence to support additional investigation of education, coping skills, and mindfulness approaches (Cohen-Katz et al., 2005; Edmonds et al., 2012; Italia, Favara-Scacco, Di Cataldo, & Russo, 2008; Lupo et al., 2012; Mackenzie, Poulin, & Seidman-Carlson, 2006; Rask, Jensen, Andersen, & Zachariae, 2009; Turner et al., 2009). Mindfulness refers to intentional and nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment, engaging in the moment rather than acting on habit or wishing the moment were different. Oncology staff members also have shown small improvements following monthly group meetings.