When wives are diagnosed with breast cancer – psychopathology in partners, a review

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Abstract

Introduction: Breast cancer is the most common malignant tumor in women. This diagnosis affects not only the patients, but also their partners. The development of physical and psychological symptoms of stress in breast cancer survivors is affected by the partners support and vice versa.

Objectives: Assessment of the eventual existence of psychopathology in the partners of patients with breast cancer.

Methods: Literature review using the terms breast cancer, partners, spouses, psychopathology, psychological/psychiatric symptoms, depression, anxiety.

Results: Partners of patients with breast cancer are the most involved family members in their support. In one article, these individuals reported feeling "in limbo". They may have difficulties in social, sexual and emotional adjustment and in marital relationship. While some studies show that a small proportion of partners present high levels of long term anxiety, others show that they are subjected to a higher stress level, psychiatric morbidity and increased risk of developing depression. They visit the physician more often for somatic and psychological symptoms, and are at greater risk of being hospitalized with affective disorder. The social support has influence in Depression, through various coping mechanisms.

Discussion and Conclusions: Facing a threatening event (diagnosis, consultation surveillance and results) can be seen as an interpersonal experience shared by the couple. Higher quality of relationship predicted better mental health in patients with breast cancer. Greater quality of their physical health predicted higher quality of mental and physical health in the partners. Further research is necessary, to identify and create assessment and assistance strategies to these partners with psychopathology.