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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
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“Pathways from Patient-Centered Communication to the Psychological and Physical Health of Cancer Survivors: The Potential Roles of Worry about Cancer Recurrence, Pessimism & Social Isolation”

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Pathways from Patient-Centered Communication to the Psychological and Physical Health of
Cancer Survivors: The Potential Roles of Worry about Cancer Recurrence, Pessimism & Social
Isolation

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Abstract

Patient-centered communication (PCC) is an integral component of high-quality health care, especially in the context of cancer. While a growing body of research suggests that PCC has notable effects on downstream patient health outcomes (e.g., psychological distress), the specific mechanisms that drive these associations remain underexplored. Informed by Epstein and Street's (2007) conceptual model of PCC in cancer care, this study aimed to examine the effect of PCC on three health outcomes (psychological distress, physical function limitations, and general health), test the potentially mediating effect of worry about cancer recurrence, and explore the moderating roles of pessimism about medical appointments and social isolation. These aims were addressed using cross-sectional data from 1,119 individuals with a history of cancer who participated in the 2021 Health Information National Trends Survey – Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results Program (HINTS-SEER). The sample ($M_{age} = 70.86$ years, 46.1% male) reported low levels of psychological distress, and a minority (19.6%) reported having at least one physical function limitation or being in suboptimal general health (16.0%). Higher PCC was associated with lower psychological distress, but there was no direct association between PCC and physical function limitations or general health. Independent mediation analyses revealed significant indirect effects, suggesting that more PCC was associated with less worry about cancer recurrence and, in turn, less psychological distress and a lower probability of suboptimal general health. In separate moderation analyses, greater pessimism and social isolation were related to more psychological distress and a higher probability of suboptimal general health but unrelated to physical function limitations. No significant interaction effects emerged between PCC and pessimism. However, social isolation moderated the negative association between PCC and psychological distress. These findings suggest that enhancing PCC in cancer care may have beneficial effects on reducing psychological distress and improving general health outcomes, particularly among individuals who experience social isolation. These effects may be partially mediated by reduced worry about cancer recurrence, highlighting the importance of addressing cancer-related concerns in PCC to enhance psychosocial well-being and overall health outcomes.