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Exploring the Mental Health-Related Challenges of Cancer Caregivers

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Abstract

Cancer is currently the most severe disease and the biggest threat to human life, posing many challenges for patients as well as those who care for them. Caregivers play a vital role in the recovery and overall well-being of cancer patients. In fulfilling their multiple responsibilities, they encounter various personal, social, and environmental challenges. Research has shown that individuals who care for cancer patients often experience physical, psychological, behavioral, and financial difficulties, which adversely affect their daily lifestyle and health.

The purpose of this review paper is to analyze and highlight some important scientific studies that focus on the quality of life of cancer caregivers, their psychological problems, such as burden, stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, several suitable psychological interventions are also available for addressing these problems; therefore, they have also been included. This paper is based on numerous scientific studies on the health of cancer caregivers, compiled from various publications and research journals. The present review also reveals that caregivers widely face various psychological challenges. Furthermore, it provides a foundation and direction for future research concerning the health of cancer caregivers.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a complex and challenging disease that not only affects patients but also significantly influences the lives of their caregivers. Most often, these caregivers are family members, spouses, or close relatives who offer crucial emotional support, practical help, and day-to-day care during the course of the illness (Geng et al., 2018; Haley, 2003). Cancer is one of the major health burdens of the 21st century. According to the World Health Organization (2025), Cancer emerged as one of the primary causes of death across the globe, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020.Thus, it can be said that at present, cancer remains a complex, chronic, and often life-threatening condition, which demands substantial time, resources, and emotional investment not only from the patients but also from their caregivers

Cancer Caregivers:

Informal or primary caregivers are those individuals who, without payment, offer continuous support to persons with chronic illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, or any disabilities. This support may involve assistance with activities of daily living (ADL) such as toileting, bathing, feeding, dressing, walking, and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) like house cleaning, shopping, and cooking (Roth et al., 2015). Along with this, caregivers also take on tasks such as medication management, emotional support, and financial support (Northouse et al., 2012). In chronic illness caregiving responsibility may continue for many years, compelling caregivers to make considerable adjustments in their personal, social, and professional spheres. They are not only emotionally committed to the patient's well-being but also serve as an essential part of the overall care journey. The disease process, along with treatment procedures and their side effects, can lead to significant distress across physical, psychological, social, and financial domains for both patients and their caregivers. Despite often being neglected, cancer caregivers serve as a vital support system for patients and represent an essential part of the healthcare system. This article presents a comprehensive review of the health experiences, difficulties, and challenges faced by caregivers. The purpose of this research paper is to make caregivers aware of their health, to identify opportunities that strengthen their well-being, and to contribute toward the formulation of appropriate policies for cancer caregivers.

Psychological health related Challenges:

Many caregivers of cancer patients often find themselves unprepared to assume this demanding and responsible role. Beyond the physical strain, it significantly impacts their emotional and psychological well-being. As a result, caregivers' mental, social, and emotional health is disrupted, which may create an imbalance in their overall life. Observing the patient's physical and emotional distress, coping with uncertainties surrounding the disease, managing treatment-related complications, handling financial burdens, and enduring social isolation, together these circumstances play a major role in causing psychological health difficulties for caregivers.

Burden:

The term **"burden"** is used to describe the physical, mental, social, and financial strain that people (such as caregivers) experience due to constant pressures, responsibilities, or difficulties (Zarit et al., 1980). However, there can be two types of caregiver burden: **observable** and **perceived. Observable burden** refers to the objective and measurable aspects of care giving. It is externally visible and can often be quantified by others. **Perceived burden** represents the subjective, internal experience of the caregiver. It reflects how stressful, overwhelming, or manageable the caregiver considers their role to be (Gupta et al., 2009).

The person who takes care of a cancer patient has to manage multiple responsibilities. Balancing the increasing needs of the patient, coping with the complexities of medical procedures, coordinating with doctors and medications, handling other household responsibilities along with professional or job-related duties - all these factors place the caregiver in a state of continuous fatigue, stress, and burden (Lee et al., 2015). Several other factors also contribute to an increase in caregiver burden, such as the deteriorating health condition and greater disability of the patient, the number of hours spent in caregiving, the diversity of caregiving tasks, the type of care setting (home-based or institutional), as well as the caregiver's gender and age (Metzelthin et al., 2017; Plöthner et al., 2019).The patient's dependency on the caregiver, and the demands of caregiving, also affect the quality of life of informal caregivers(Farina et al., 2017).

Studies indicate that female caregivers experience higher levels of depression and caregiving burden compared to their male counterparts (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2006; Schrank et al., 2016). A higher level of education is associated with a lower caregiver burden (Li et al., 2018). Family caregivers are affected not only by their caregiving activities but also by the psychological well-being of cancer patients throughout the entire treatment process (Lim et al., 2014). The lack of family and social support has been also identified as a significant factor contributing to an increase in caregiver burden (Siefert et al., 2008). Furthermore, if caregivers hold a negative perception of their role and focus more on difficulties, sacrifices, and losses, their burden tends to be felt more intensely (Goldzweig et al., 2013).

A study found that male caregivers with lower burden and higher self -efficacy are more likely to experience improvements in their mental health (Duggleby et al., 2016). Üzar-Özçetin& Dursun (2020) found that caregivers with low resilience tend to experience higher burden and lower quality of life. Kazemi et al. (2021) revealed that effective coping skills reduced the personal burden, thereby improving the physical health and psychological well-being of cancer caregivers. Moreover, when caregivers rely more on negative coping strategies, such as escape-avoidance and distancing, they tend to experience higher levels of burden. Furthermore, Kuzuya et al. (2011) found that caregivers who experienced a high level of burden had patients who were hospitalized more frequently, had a lower quality of life, and showed higher mortality rates. Thus, the burden in the caregiving role is a factor that severely affects the overall health of cancer caregivers and cancer patients.

Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Cancer caregiving is a demanding and emotionally taxing role that places caregivers at high risk for stress, anxiety, and depression. Stress, anxiety, and depression in caregivers are interrelated. Chronic stress may lead to heightened anxiety, which, if unaddressed, can progress to depression. Chronic stress in caregivers can manifest physically as fatigue (Kang et al., 2020; Bevans & Sternberg, 2012), headaches, sleep disturbances (Ovsiannikova et al., 2024), and weakened immunity (Romero-Martínez, 2025), and psychologically as irritability, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Campos-Puente et al., 2019).

Anxiety is a common emotional response among caregivers. It often stems from uncertainty about the patient's prognosis, fear of disease progression, and worries about the adequacy of their caregiving. Continuous vigilance, hyper-alertness to the patient's symptoms, and the fear of making mistakes in care can perpetuate anxiety. Studies have shown that spousal caregivers and those providing intensive care for patients with advanced-stage cancer are particularly vulnerable to high anxiety levels (Chan & Ng, 2022; Oechsle et al., 2019).

Depression among caregivers is closely linked to stress and anxiety, but also arises from feelings of helplessness, social isolation, and perceived lack of control over the caregiving situation. Geng et al. (2018)stated that factors such as caregiver burden, patient's declining health, financial strain, poor sleep quality, and lack of social support are positively associated with higher depression levels. Conversely, a strong sense of coherence, supportive relationships, higher educational levels, and better overall quality of life can mitigate depressive symptoms

Studies have also found that when family caregivers (FCs) care for a patient over an extended period, they inevitably bear physical, mental, and emotional burdens. In addition, constant stress, lack of sleep, anxiety, and physical exhaustion make caregivers more vulnerable to various illnesses. If this situation persists for a long time, it can also increase their risk of mortality (Govina et al., 2015; Johansen et al., 2018; Sanderson et al., 2013). Caregivers who experience a greater burden were most likely to be affected, particularly by anxiety and depression. Thus, caregiver burden emerged as the strongest predictor of anxiety and depression (Alsirafy et al., 2021). The study by Litzelman (2019) indicated that high levels of stress and depression among caregivers potentially had an adverse impact on the overall well-being of both patients and their caregivers. When caregivers were mentally healthy, they were able to provide the necessary emotional support and practical assistance to patients (Decadt et al., 2021), which in turn reduced anxiety and depression in patients (Cochrane et al., 2021). Haley et al. (2000) reported that spouses caring for hospice cancer patients experienced higher levels of depression, lower life satisfaction, and poorer physical health compared to individuals who were not caregivers. Another study indicated that if family caregivers (FCs) have a high level of resilience, they have a low level of burden and psychological distress, and a high level of quality of life (Kim et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2014).Thus, stress, anxiety, and depression in caregivers not only affect their ability to provide effective care but also negatively impact their physical and mental health.

Psychological Interventions

Cancer caregivers face many problems during caregiving. However, by making positive changes in their lifestyle, adopting effective coping strategies, strengthening self-efficacy, and practicing mindfulness techniques, they can reduce these problems. In addition, if they are provided with psychoeducation related to the illness, therapeutic counseling, and certain therapies as needed, such as ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) or CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy),thus their psychological problems can certainly be reduced or even alleviated.

Psychoeducation: A study found that educational programs for caregivers (PCs) help reduce their caregiving burden and also improve their quality of life. These educational programs not only provide them with essential knowledge and skills but also enhance their caregiving capacity. Topics included in such programs, such as comfort care (ensuring the patient's comfort), maintaining hygiene and health, meal planning, and effective symptom management, enable caregivers to understand and meet the daily needs of patients more effectively(Belgacemet al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2022; Mirhosseini et al., 2025).Such programs are beneficial for both caregivers and patients. Caregivers experience less fatigue and anxiety, maintain better mental health, and patients receive more attentive and high-quality care. Overall, this positively impacts the entire healthcare experience.

Coping strategies : Cancer caregivers use different types of coping strategies, and these strategies can significantly influence their psychological and physical well-being.Problem-focused coping (actively addressing challenges, seeking solutions, organizing care) often helps reduce stress, burden, and fatigue, and can improve quality of life because caregivers feel more in control of the situation (Dionne-Odom et al., 2016; Ghane et al., 2016; Teixeira et al., 2018; Toseland et al., 1995).Emotion-focused coping (managing emotions through venting, seeking emotional support, or using relaxation techniques) can help lower anxiety and depression, but may be less effective in reducing caregiving tasks or practical burdens (Ashofteh&Sheibani,2024; Kazemiet al., 2021; Papastavrou et al., 2012; Perez-Ordóñez et al., 2016).Avoidant or maladaptive coping (denial, withdrawal, substance use, or distancing) is generally associated with higher levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and lower quality of life, as it prevents caregivers from effectively managing challenges (Devet al., 2024; Perez-Ordóñez et al., 2016; Rumpold et al., 2017). Adaptive coping (mindfulness, positive reframing, acceptance, spiritual coping) can reduce psychological distress and improve overall well-being, resilience, and quality of life for both caregivers and patients (Lim et al., 2014; Nagy et al., 2024; Obeagu & Parray, 2025; Vinci et al., 2024).

Mindfulness : Mindfulness refers to the practice of deliberately focusing on each present-moment experience with an attitude of openness and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).In medical settings, mindfulness practice is often provided in the form of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Schellekens et al., 2014) or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Van Der Lee & Garssen, 2012). Tkatch et al. (2017) study resulted that mindfulness-based intervention helped decrease caregiver burden, stress, anxiety, and loneliness, while promoting better mental well-being. A meta-analysis conducted by Khoury et al. (2013) revealed that mindfulness-based therapy consistently reduces stress, anxiety, and depression. Further studies have shown that practicing mindfulness enhances concentration, boosts immune system functioning, and supports overall well-being (Black & Slavich, 2016; Carlson et al., 2007; Fang et al., 2010). Studies found that mobile/online-based (Health) mindfulness interventions led to improvements in cancer patients' quality of life, pain intensity, and post-traumatic growth, along with reductions in anxiety and depression. Among their caregivers, improvements were observed in mindfulness, post-traumatic growth, and quality of life, along with a decrease in fatigue (Hecht et al., 2021; Kuboet al., 2019). Thus, mindfulness practices serve as powerful resources for caregivers, helping them manage the overwhelming emotional challenges that come with caring for a loved one who is ill. By training themselves to remain anchored in the present moment, caregivers are less likely to become consumed by regrets about the past or fears about the future. This present-focused awareness enables them to regulate their emotions more effectively, reduce stress, and respond with greater patience and compassion..

Social support : Social support plays a crucial role in improving the well-being of caregivers. It helps reduce stress, depression, anxiety, caregiving burden, and reduce consequences of illnessby offering emotional comfort, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging (Awasthi & Mishra, 2007; Long et al., 2020, Washington et al., 2020). When caregivers receive support from family, friends, peer groups, or online communities, they feel less isolated and more capable of managing their responsibilities. This supportive network not only lightens their workload but also provides encouragement, validation, and coping resources. As a result, social support significantly enhances caregivers' quality of life, enabling them to maintain better mental health, resilience, and overall life satisfaction.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-

ACT has been shown to play a significant role in improving the psychological well-being of cancer caregivers. This approach is particularly beneficial in caregiving contexts where certain stressors (e.g., illness progression, uncertainty, or loss) cannot be controlled or eliminated (Hayes et al., 2012).By encouraging acceptance of difficult emotions, fostering mindfulness, and helping individuals clarify and commit to personal values, ACT enables caregivers to cope more effectively with the challenges of caregiving. This therapeutic approach reduces feelings of burden, anxiety, and depression by shifting the focus from attempting to eliminate distress to developing psychological flexibility (Gu et al., 2025; Mosher et al., 2021). As a result, caregivers are better able to manage stress, maintain emotional balance, and find meaning in their caregiving role, which ultimately enhances their overall quality of life.

CONCLUSION :

The present review paper indicates that the journey of cancer is as challenging for the caregivers as it is for the patients. During caregiving, they face various psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and burden. However, even in these circumstances, if both—the patient and the caregiver—support each other, understand each other's needs and emotions, this journey can become somewhat easier. Furthermore, if they effectively utilize the above-mentioned psychological interventions, they can not only overcome these challenges but also enhance their quality of life, protect their mental health, and improve the quality of care and emotional support provided to the patient. These findings emphasize the need for action across different levels of healthcare systems, societal attitudes, and support initiatives, highlighting the importance of caregiver well-being within the broader context of cancer care.

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