Spinning tires: Exploring Cancer Survivors’ Perceptions of Chemo Brain

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**Introduction:** Cognitive problems, labeled “chemo brain,” have been reported in as many as 75% of cancer survivors, and some breast cancer survivors have reported that it is the most adverse treatment side effect. For many survivors, the cognitive symptoms diminish; but for some, the effects persist long after active treatment is completed. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of cognitive concerns among breast and ovarian cancer survivors and their beliefs about what might help improve their abilities.

**Methods:** In this qualitative descriptive study, a focus group was held with 8 breast and ovarian cancer survivors. The sample consisted of women who contacted the research office after receiving a flyer from a community oncology practice that provides survivorship services. An experienced focus group facilitator moderated the focus group, which was audio recorded and transcribed; an assistant moderator took notes and recorded verbal and non-verbal cues over the course of 90 min. As a check on the dependability of the focus group findings, the group facilitator then conducted individual telephone interviews with 2 additional women who had been unable to attend the group. The analysis was informed by Patton’s qualitative content analysis procedures. Significant phrases were used to develop initial codes, which were then combined into similar grouping categories.

**Findings:** The ten women’s average age was 55 years; the average time since diagnosis was 4.6 years. Four preliminary descriptive themes emerged from the data: nature of the cognitive concern, emotional/relationship consequences, coping strategies, and suggestions for interventions. To address the trustworthiness of findings, the three researchers, all of whom attended the focus group, will further review the transcript/ interview notes and discuss the themes. Two researchers have clinical experience with survivors and the third has conducted research on cancer survivorship and cognitive limitations.

**Discussion/Conclusions:** Providers need to address the serious effects of cognitive limitations for many cancer survivors. Interventions to assist them should address the emotional consequences as well as providing specific strategies for building cognitive abilities.