

Mental Health Prevention for Children of Somatically Ill Parents: A Challenge for Family-oriented Medicine

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Working Group



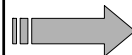
- Hamburg (D): G. Romer & colleagues
(*cancer, multiple sclerosis and others*)
Vienna (A): M. Friedrich & colleagues (*gynecological cancer*)
Aarhus (DK): M. Thastum & colleagues (*cancer, diabetes*)
Turku (FIN): J. Piha, F. Schmitt & colleagues (*cancer*)
Bucharest (RO): S. Milea & colleagues (*brain-injuries*)
Athens (EL): J. Tsiantis & colleagues (*multiple sclerosis*)
Basle (CH): B. Steck & colleagues (*multiple sclerosis and others*)
Sutton (UK): M. Watson & colleagues (*cancer*)

Illness-related Stressors

- Frequent medical procedures
- Hospitalizations
- Declines in socioeconomic status
- Dependency upon others
- Social stigmatization
- Changes in bodily appearance
- Lower self-esteem
- Shifts in future perspectives
- Threat to life

Family System: Adaptive Mechanisms to Cancer in a Parent (Rost, 1992)

- Strong cohesion within the family system
- isolation from social environment
- low flexibility
- avoiding of conflicts
- parentification of children



Inhibition of individuation/autonomy

Children of parents with cancer: Age-specific concerns

	Typical stressor or conflict
Pregnancy	Mother's life vs life of the child
Infancy	Separation anxiety constitutes major fear
Toddlerhood	Separation as punishment; fear of mutilation
Preschool-age	Magical thinking, fear of having caused parent's illness
School-age	Body-related fears; fear of causing additional burden
Adolescence	Fear of genetic transmission, conflict between autonomy and responsibility, „detachment guilt“, identity conflicts

State of the Art

- Children of cancer patients (n=116): 50% clinically relevant psychosocial symptoms (Birenbaum et al. 1999)
- Adolescent daughters of ill mothers have highest risk (Compas et al. 1994; Grant & Compas 1995; Welch et al. 1996).
- Children of terminally ill parents (n=136) only 56% informed, no explanations to younger children (Siegel et al. 1996)
- Family members do not assist children affected by mothers' breast cancer (Lewis, 2004)

Epidemiological Data

- Extrapolation from U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (1993):
5-15% of children exposed to parental somatic illness
(Worsham, Compas & Sydney 1997)
- German epidemiological survey
(n = 1950; Barkmann, Romer, Schulte-Markwort, 2005):
 - 4,1 % prevalence of serious somatic diseases in parents of 4-17-year olds; of these 29% cancer
 - Prevalence of psychological symptoms:
 - exposed children 34,2 %, non-exposed 17,8



Defined Objectives

- to acquire data on the **mental health status of children** whose parents are seriously ill,
- to identify associated **risk and protective factors**
- to **develop, implement and evaluate child psychiatric liaison and consulting services** at several centres



COSIP Study: „BASIC EMPIRICS“

Question: Degree and distribution of psychosocial abnormalities (CBCL, YSR) in children of somatically ill parents in relation to:

- objective impairment of ill parent (*Karnofsky-Index*)
- Type and prognosis of parental disease (*physician's information*)
- Age and gender of child
- Gender of ill parent
- Family relational functioning (*Family Assessment Device*)



Transnational data obtained

	families	children	ill mother	ill father	cancer	MS	other diseases
D	106	167	67	39	69	26	11
A	73	106	60	16	63	1	11
DK	46	64	34	12	30	0	16
FIN	85	140	61	24	85	0	0
EL	56	56	40	16	0	56	0
RO	58	58	23	35	0	0	58
CH	134	216			19	66	59
UK	134	138	124	10	134	0	0
Total	692	945	409	152	400	149	155



German COSIP Sample

	cancer	MS	other	total
# families	54	25	7	86
# ill fathers	25	5	3	33
# ill mothers	29	20	4	53
# children 4-10 J	26	10	5	41
# children 11-17 J	27	15	2	44



FAD-Subscale: Affective Responsiveness (6 Items)

Example Items:

19. "Some of us just don't respond emotionally."
28. "We do not show our love for each other."
39. "Tenderness takes second place to other things in our family."
57. "We cry openly."

FAD-Subscale: Affective Involvement (7 Items)

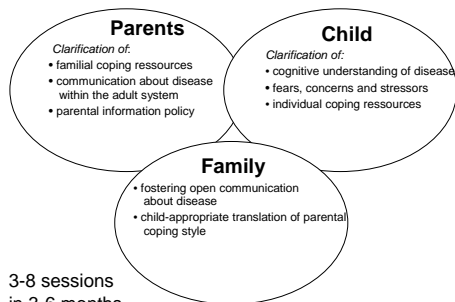
Example Items:

5. "If someone is in trouble, the others become too involved."
25. "We are too self-centered."
42. "Our family shows interest in each other only when they can get something out of it."
54. "Even though we mean well, we intrude too much into each others' lives."

Preliminary conclusions

- Children of ill parents are at risk for internalizing problems
- Gender matters
- The way emotions are handled in a family matters a lot!
- They are two major family styles that are problematic:
 - **overdistanced** inhibition to show and share emotions
 - **underdistanced** affective overinvolvement (enmeshment)

COSIP Counselling Concept



3-8 sessions
in 3-6 months

Elements of COSIP intervention

- Age-appropriate information
- Acknowledgement of family resources
- Facilitating familial communication on parent's illness
- Support of parenting competence
- Enhancing child's active coping (seeking emotional support, reframing)
- Anticipation of grief

Burdening for Children:

- diffuse imaginations and fantasies of the illness
- „conspiracy of silence“ in the family
- adults never show feelings of grief and fear
- illness dominates the whole family life
- increased feeling of responsibility

Helpful for Children:

- Understanding of symptoms
- open communication within the family
- stress-free areas of normal child and youth life
- precisely defined responsibilities
- mental preparation for ongoing process

Most helpful aspects of COSIP intervention (forced choice)

Parents (n = 33)	
Enhanced sense of competence in parenting	48%
Increased emotional availability for child	33%
More open intrafamilial communication	27%
Children (n = 10)	
More active coping style	50%
Therapists (n = 44)	
Anticipatory mourning in child	28%
Improved cognitive understanding in child	25%

Summary and Conclusion

- Children of medically ill parents are at risk for internalizing problems.
- Family relational functioning is a meaningful target of intervention.
- Interventions are helpful if they foster parenting competencies and children's active coping.

Thank you for your
attention!