Coping with a Brain Tumor

Randy LaGrone, PhD
Clinical Psychologist
Psychology Department
Nebraska Medicine
Shock of diagnosis.
“Will I still be me?”
Anxiety

- Most common psychological symptom
- Experienced as dread when faced with uncertainty
- Anticipatory anxiety about the future
- Can escalate into panic attacks
- “Kindling effect” of worrying/stressors
Depression vs. Normal Mood

- Frequency of Symptoms
- Intensity
- Duration
- Impact on functioning
Symptoms of Depression

- Sadness/tearfulness
- Negativity
- Loss of pleasure
- No motivation
- Withdrawal
- Sleep problems
- Difficulty thinking
Motivation Symptoms

• Avoidance
• Withdrawal
• Increased dependency
• Decreased activity
• Suicidal ideation
Basic Psychology

- We feel the way we think
- Experience is subjective (beliefs, attitudes, expectations, attributions)
- It’s not what happens, but what you think about the situation
- We can learn better ways to think and cope
“When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the man who said on his deathbed that he had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which never happened.”
Tumor location and treatment side effects

• Personality and behavior changes
• Slowed thinking
• Memory loss
• Depression and fatigue
• Confusion and disorientation
• Irritability and outbursts (short fuse)
Faulty Thinking That Maintains Stress

- **Catastrophizing** - seeing the worst case
- **Personalization** – “I’m the only one to feel this”
- **All-Or-Nothing Thinking** - extremes only
Key Components of Coping

• Information about diagnosis, treatment and prognosis (meds: anxiety/depression)
• Realistic expectations, goal-setting
• Mood monitoring (taking in the good)
• Pleasant activities (social interaction)
• Assertiveness skills (pacing activity)
• Having a problem solving strategy
• Identifying faulty thinking (emotional reasoning)
• Physician approved exercise
Cancer Considerations

- Problems with body image and self worth
- Societal value that self image (identity) is based on physical appearance
- Public intrusiveness
- Changes in social interaction in public (staring, questions, silent language, etc.)
- Strains of interaction (overcompensation)
- Emotional cost to cope in public
ACT Strategy for Coping

A = Accept situation (Tip: You don’t have to like it)

C = Choose to be reasonably happy anyway

T = Take action to find enjoyment, meaning and purpose
Brain tips . . .

- Notebook, organizer or smart phone
- Checklist, daily routine (1 thing at a time)
- Process thinking – say steps out loud
- Pace activity, avoid overstimulation, be realistic (sleep and nutrition)
- Discuss challenges with family (plan)
- Support group, psychological help, neuropsychological evaluation
Physician Approved Exercise

• Works rapidly

• 10 minutes a day improves mood

• Affects cellular and molecular levels of the brain, causes positive chemical and structural changes

• Effective as medication for many people
End of presentation

Questions and discussion . . .