Communicating BCERP Science from the Lens of Uncertainty Theories

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Objectives

• Define uncertainty
• Provide a theoretical backdrop for considering uncertainty
• Identify how understanding uncertainty can be applied to breast cancer communication activities
Uncertainty Defined

• Uncertainty occurs in a situation in which the decision maker is unable to assign definite value to objects or events and/or is unable to predict outcomes accurately (Mishel, 1984).

• Uncertainty typically arises in a situation that has limited or incalculable information about the predicted outcomes of behavior (Huettel et al., 2005).
Uncertainty Theories

- Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975)
- Uncertainty Management Theory (Gudykunst, 2005)
- Problematic Integration Theory (Babrow, 2001)
- Theory of Motivated Information Management (Afifi and Weiner, 2004)
- Uncertainty in Illness Theory (Mishel, 1999)
Uncertainty in Illness Theory

• According to Mishel, uncertainty has four forms in the illness experience:
  – Ambiguity concerning the state of the illness
  – Complexity regarding treatment and system of care
  – Lack of information about the diagnosis and seriousness of the illness
  – Unpredictability of the course of the disease and prognosis
Uncertainty in Illness Theory

• Uncertainty can be appraised as a danger or an opportunity

• Uncertainty as danger leads to:
  – Mobilizing, which includes strategies of direct action, vigilance, and information seeking
  – Affect-management occurs when mobilizing is not effective

• Uncertainty as an opportunity leads to managing uncertainty by focusing on the positive
Underlying & Potentially Useful Principles

• Generally, uncertainty is conceptualized as negative... but not always
• Uncertainty has been associated with negative outcomes... but not always
• Individuals will strive to reduce uncertainty because it is often uncomfortable and makes decision-making difficult... but not always
• Lack of congruence between what is expected and what is experience, increases uncertainty
• When a source is perceived as highly credible, uncertainty can be reduced.
• Individuals may decide to maintain uncertainty in some situations
• Uncertainty in everyday lives – it is inherent to most of the decisions we make
• Novelty and unfamiliarity can result in uncertainty
• Certainty requires less cognitive effort and we are cognitive misers
BCERP Communication Implications

• Community Partners, Advocates, and Survivors
  – Living with a great deal of uncertainty – diagnosis, treatment effectiveness, potential reoccurrence

• Lay Audiences
  – They want certainty – what can we give them?
  – Address myths directly and consistently
  – Lay abstracts meet a clear audience need
  – Precautionary principle cannot be underestimated for BCERP
BCERP Communication Implications

- Journalists
  - Science news vs science controversy
  - With emerging science there is uncertainty and how we communicate findings influences journalists’ approaches
  - Press releases to accompany journal publications
  - BCERP needs to be a voice so that it is more science news than science controversy
Moving Forward

- Awareness of uncertainty as tangible is a good move
- Survivors experience a lot of uncertainty through their cancer experience and that also impacts their networks
- Attempt to reduce uncertainty (generally) with our messages so that people feel confident in engaging in recommendations
- We need to “steer the ship” for what shows up in the press so that we can help lay audiences effectively reduce and/or manage their uncertainty about environmental risks and breast cancer
Thank you!

and

Questions?