

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?

