



# PUGET SOUND QUARTERLY

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## Family-Focused Research In Nursing Science: Why Is It Important To Do This Work?

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Over twenty years of research by the Family Functioning Research

Program at the University of Washington School of Nursing points to five reasons to conduct family-focused research. Understanding these reasons and the data-based evidence behind them can assist oncology nurses at all levels to provide even better care to individuals and families experiencing the impact of serious illness.

### 1. Families are distressed and suffer unnecessarily when a member has a serious illness.

When serious illnesses arise, contemporary healthcare settings commonly treat the individual; nursing science has begun to discover that many serious illnesses are dually stressful for family members. Studies show that even high functioning families struggle and suffer unnecessarily when a member has a serious illness. Partners of women with breast cancer had increasingly depressed moods as illness-demands increased and illness-related demands wore down family functioning over time.



Children also suffer when a parent has a serious illness. This suffering relates directly to the child's illness-related concerns as well as the real and symbolic threat to the child's sense of security. There is no question that the type, form, and quality of parenting is affected when a parent is diagnosed with serious illness. The largest evidence for this claim comes from studies of children whose parent has cancer. Eighty-one percent of children of mothers with early stage breast cancer feared that their mother was going to die from the disease. In a seminal study of children whose mother had breast cancer

or diabetes, children of mothers with serious illness tended to have lower self-esteem scores than did children of well mothers.

### 2. Family members do not know, understand, or supportively respond to the expressed thoughts and feelings of other members about the serious illness.

Multiple studies demonstrate that family members do not know, do not understand, do not focus on, and report not having the skills or confidence to support other family members when it comes to serious illness. Even when a parent diagnosed with cancer is witness to their child's distress from the illness, they often do not know what to say or do; they feel they are excessively consumed by their own feelings of tiredness or sickness; and report they are struggling with their own illness experience. A large portion of children and adolescents report

that no one, not even family members, helped them cope with the impact of parental cancer. Approximately 25% of younger children and 15% of older children "simply stated that the family did nothing to help them."

Couples experiencing the acute phase of breast cancer treatment are known to function in survival mode during which competing demands distract them from attending to and supporting each other's thoughts, feelings, and needs for support about the cancer. Evidence is that couples interpersonally and emotionally disconnect in the ways

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