INTRODUCTION

• Annually, 60,000 young adults (ages 18-39) are diagnosed with cancer in the United States.1
• Unlike other age cohorts, survival rates for young adults have improved little.1
• Young adults trade footholds on budding careers, relationships, and educational attainment for pursuit of cancer treatments.2,3
• Due to young age, most have limited exposure to traumatic events which foster development of coping mechanisms.4
• Illness disruptions create lost sense of identity and purpose,5,6
• Thus, placing young adults at risk for hopelessness, despair, and desire for hastened death.7,8,9
• Studies acknowledge vital role of hope in motivating behaviors inside and outside of advanced cancer treatment10; yet we have no studies exploring the role of hope among young adults with advanced cancer.

STUDY AIMS

(1) To investigate the meaning of hope for young adults throughout their disease trajectory
(2) To discern the social and psychological processes young adults with advanced cancer employ to engage hope.

METHODS

• Qualitative grounded theory methods
• Young adults (ages 18-39) diagnosed with a stage III, IV, recurrent, metastatic, or blood cancer were recruited from cancer treatment centers and young adult cancer support programs.
• Participants completed one semi-structured interview, a sociodemographic survey, and an original instrument assessing fluctuations in hope titled, The Hope Timeline.
• Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using constant comparative methods of data collection, analysis, and synthesis.

RESULTS

The Contingent Hope Theoretical Framework portrays how young adults (N=13) living with advanced cancers engage hope to cope with their life-limiting illness. This novel theory includes five inter-related psychosocial processes.

Psychosocial Process of Contingent Hope Theory:

- Navigating uncertainty: shattered visions of health and healthcare systems; advocating for care; exploring coping mechanisms
- Feeling “broken”: body betrayal, despair, internalizing of stigmas
- Disorienting grief: loss of orientation to all aspects of former life; lost sense of identity; social isolation
- Finding bearings: prioritizing health over social roles; reframing goals; seeking control and autonomy
- Reconciling identity: building trust in one’s body; cultivating relationships; exploring purpose

CONCLUSIONS

Study findings portray the influential role of hope in motivating young adults with advanced cancer through disorienting grief towards an authentic self that marries cherished facets of past and present-day identities. The aptitude acquired through enacting the processes of the contingent hope theoretical framework foster young adults’ ability to reframe relationships with their bodies; balance medical and social lives; and reclaim an identity that nurtures hope for a meaningful life.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Need for ongoing assessment of depression, anxiety, isolation, and despair
- Creation of a communication guide that tracks goals, goal attainment, and barriers to goal attainment
- Psychoeducational education on goal reframing, young adult social support resources, mindfulness
- Referrals for counseling to foster adaptation to illness and identity reconciliation