

Commentary on “nursing home residents’ sense of coherence and functional status

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Abstract:

Functional status is an important measure in older adults. Functional decline has been associated with emergency room visits in elders (Wilber, Blanda, & Gerson, 2006), and elders are at a high risk of functional decline after hospitalization (Cornett, Swine, Malhomme, Gillet, & D’Hoore, 2006). Furthermore, those with functional decline consume larger resources. Therefore, identifying those elders at risk for functional decline is important. This descriptive study examined functional status over time in older adults living in nursing homes.

Keywords: holistic nursing | nursing | nursing home residents | nursing homes | older adults | functional status | functional decline

Article

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The authors used Antonovsky’s Salutogenic Model in designing the study to examine functional status over time. One of the major concepts of this model is “sense of coherence” (SOC). A SOC is a way people view their life, and a person with a strong SOC would feel that his or her life has meaning and is manageable.

More importantly, SOC has a positive influence on health. In fact, a recent systematic review (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006) noted SOC is strongly associated with health regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, or study design, and has also been used to predict health. The author used the concept of SOC as a way to describe functional status in two groups of nursing home residents: (a) those with a strong SOC, and (b) those with a weak SOC.

Data were collected from 65 residents, recruited from 10 nursing homes, who were cognitively intact or had mild cognitive impairment and who were age 65 or older. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, the investigator administered the SOC measure and collected data from the most recent Minimal Data Set assessment on the medical record to ascertain function (time 1). Data were again measured in 10 to 12 weeks using the same procedure (time 2).

Few differences were found among the 10 nursing homes. According to the model, those with a stronger SOC would have better functional status. Results noted that those in the strong SOC group had lower function scores (better functional status) compared to those in the weak SOC group. The weak SOC group noted higher functional status scores (indicating poorer functional status) at time 2 than at time 1. Therefore, the weak SOC group had a decline in functional status over time in contrast to the strong SOC group having no decline in functional status over time.

Although results do not support a causal relationship between SOC and functional decline, the results indicate a difference in function between groups over time. Because the investigator accessed data from the medical record to describe function, diligence in charting, and consistency in charting among nurses, it is imperative to provide an accurate representation of function. This study clearly denotes the importance of assessing function early to be able to detect changes. Holistic nurses need to be attuned to subtle changes in functional status that may warrant nursing interventions. In addition, assessing for depression would also be important. Although depression scores are not reported in this article, depression has been associated with changes in function (Schieman & Plickert, 2007).

Further study is needed to examine factors that affect a SOC. However, results from this study are intriguing for the practicing holistic nurse. Eriksson and Lindström (2006) noted that a strong SOC is especially related to perceived mental health. A SOC “explains why people in stressful situations stay well and even are able to improve their health” (Lindström & Eriksson, 2006, p. 238). Any change in environment, such as moving into a nursing home, may be viewed as stressful. One way to facilitate a SOC is to assist the person in recognizing that resources are available to meet any demands associated with the stressor. This assistance should include a holistic view by incorporating financial, social, and psychological resources. Focusing on strengthening the SOC in nursing home elders and thus, their perception of health, may positively influence health outcomes, such as functional status. Using Anotonovsky’s model would assist the holistic nurse in focusing on health promotion to improve outcomes in older adults.

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