

Insight into the theory of unpleasant symptoms

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Abstract: *The theory of unpleasant symptoms (TOUS) is a middle-range theory that was developed in 1995 and scrutinized in 1997. It comprises of three main elements: the symptoms that the patient is experiencing; the factors that influence them, and the consequences of that experience. Factors such as physiological, psychological, and situational factors may influence symptom experience; and the effect of multiple factors over the symptom experience can be measured in terms of four dimensions such as timing, intensity, quality, and distress. Consequences of the symptom experience can be measured in terms of deviation from the normal performance levels such as compromised quality of life of the patients. Thus, the theory provides assistance to the nurses in identifying several symptoms and devising non-pharmacological interventions for managing them. The purpose of this paper is to describe, analyze and evaluate the TOUS and its relevance to patients suffering from CIPN.*

Keywords: *Nursing theory, theory of unpleasant symptoms, nursing philosophy, theory application, chemotherapy induced peripheral neuropathy*

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I. Introduction

Nursing is a profession in the healthcare sector which is primarily focussed on the care of individual, family and community so that they achieve optimal level of health. Nursing field comprises of art as well as science; and is guided by various theoretical and conceptual models. Nursing theories guide practice, research and education are said to be a set of interrelated concepts, ideas or feelings that explain some phenomena (George 2002).

Nursing theories are categorized in three level; grand nursing theory, mid-range nursing theory and nursing practice theory. Among the medium-range theories, this study deals with the Theory of Unpleasant Symptoms, which was developed in 1995 and revised in 1997, and is inclusive of variety of symptoms, its associated factors and the consequences (Lenz, Pugh, Milligan, Gift, & Suppe, 1997). The theory will help the nurses in identifying group of symptoms that the patients are experiencing and enables them to devise non-pharmacological therapy for managing them. (*THEORY OF UNPLEASANT SYMPTOMS: CRITICAL ANALYSIS*, n.d.)

Description of the Theory

TOUS has three major elements these are: the symptoms experienced by the patient, the factors which are influencing the symptoms, and the consequences of the symptom experience.

The symptoms can be multiple, may occur simultaneously; and can be measured in terms of duration, intensity, quality and distress. The duration of a symptom refers to the time for which the symptom persists, or the frequency of the symptom. Intensity indicates the severity of the symptom being experienced by the patient. Whereas, the quality domain indicates the nature of symptom and how it is perceived by the patient. For instance, pain can be described as burning, aching, and cramping by the patient who has CIPN. Lastly, the distress domain of the symptom experience refers to the degree to which the patient is bothered by it. It can be measured on a distress scale (Lee *et al.*, 2017).

In TOUS, there are three factors that influence the symptoms experienced by the patient in the above mentioned four domains; these factors are: physiologic factors, psychologic factors and situational factors. (Blakeman, 2019). Physiologic factors include the normal functioning of the body systems, the presence of any pathology and the individual's energy levels. Psychologic factors incorporate the individual's mental state and their reaction to their illness. Lastly, situational factors pertain to aspects of the individual's physical and social environment that can affect their experience and reporting of symptoms. Examples of social environment include: lifestyle behaviours, social support, employment status, and access to health care services. On the contrary, physical environments can include but are not limited to variables such as noise, light, temperature and polluted air/water; all of which can influence symptoms (Lenz & Pugh, 2014).

The TOUS incorporates outcome in terms of performance. Performance refers to the consequences or effect of symptom experience over the patient’s physical level, functional status and cognitive functioning. For example, certain symptoms may affect an individual’s ability to perform the activities of daily living, may cause deterioration of cognitive skills and deviation in the quality of life(Lee *et al.*, 2017).

TOUS can be easily understood by the theoretical model given below, which comprises of three elements: symptoms, factors which are influencing them and the consequences or effect of the symptom experience. These elements interact and influence each other and lead to the consequences which can be measured in terms of performance.

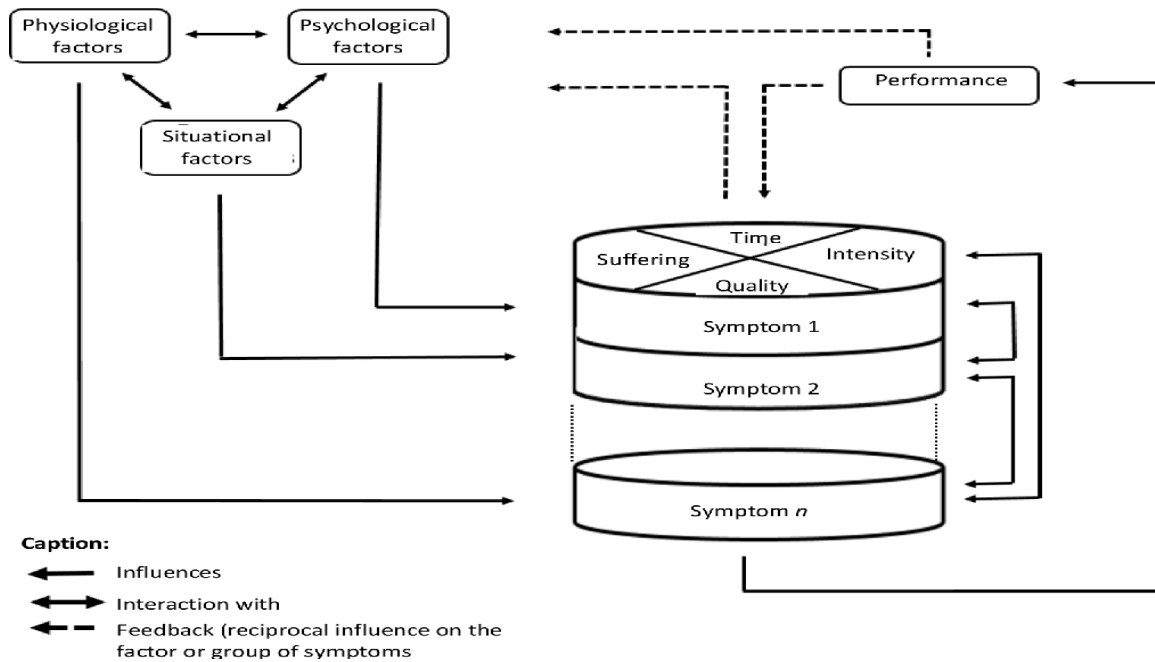


Figure 1 : Theoretical model of TOUS (Gomes et al., 2019)

Figure 1 explains that; physiological, psychological and situational factors interact with each other and influence symptom or group of symptoms; such that more related factors leads to greater influence over the unpleasant symptoms. Impact over the symptom can be measured in terms of four dimensions; and also these dimensions are influenced by each other. Performance can also be referred to as consequences of symptom experience that has a reciprocal influence on the factors i.e. the unpleasant symptoms influence the physiological, psychological and situational factors.

Application of TOUS model

Case description: Mrs Lata, 78 years old female admitted a month ago in medical oncology ward with the diagnosis of stage IV cancer cervix. She is currently on chemotherapeutic regimen of paclitaxel and docetaxel, which she is receiving every 7th day as per the regimen. Recent PET scan showed metastasis of cancer cells to the left lung and she is further planned for chemo-radiation therapy. On enquiring about the disease condition and overall well-being, she stated that “burning and aching of muscles due to chemotherapy medicine is even worse than my disease condition, sometimes i feel multiple needles are injected in my body , please help me with this noxious sensations”. She added “I’m not even able to sleep at night due to the pain in legs, medicines are somewhat helping me, but not permanently taking away this pain”

Her past history of illness shows that, Mrs. Lata is a known case of diabetes mellitus and hypothyroidism since last 10 years. She is obese with BMI of 32. Presently, she is bedridden and not able to care for herself, she requires assistance for performing activities of daily living.

Mrs. Lata is a widow, living with her daughter and son-in law. She said “My disease has caused a heavy burden on a my family, my daughter is spending a lot for my treatment. Her daughter is very calm and supportive, she said “we have tried contacting various NGO’s for funding her treatment, and hopefully we will get some fund. I’m very hopeful and i think she will be discharged soon with good health”.

Discussion: Mrs Lata’s case scenario can be put into the various concepts of the TOUS theory to understand its application. Figure 2 explains the application of TOUS. Physiological, psychological and situational factor interacts among each other and influences symptom experience, the outcome of which can be measured in terms of deviation in quality of life.

Main concepts according to TOUS and its application

Physiological factors- There is a relationship between the physiological factors and the experience of the symptom. Present case scenario describes the symptom experiences of Mrs Lata, who is 70 years old patient admitted for the treatment of grade IV cervical cancer. Various bothersome side effects of chemotherapy drugs such as tingling and burning sensations, muscle cramps etc have resulted in physical and psychological distress in the patient. Moreover, the patient is also obese and is having comorbidities such as diabetes and hypothyroidism, which might have added to the symptom severity because long standing diabetes can lead to nerve damage.

In the present case scenario, physiological factors such as older age, female gender, high body mass index (BMI) and body surface area (BSA), poor performance status (as the patient is bedridden) and chemotherapeutic agent related exposure can potentiate the symptoms experienced by the patient

Psychological factors- Psychological factors include the individual's mental state or mood, affective reaction to illness, as well as knowledge about symptoms and their meaning. In the present case scenario, financial crisis, dependency on family members for carrying out activities of daily living, long term illness and diagnosis of stage IV cervical cancer can have adverse impact over the psychological status of patient.

Situational factors- Situational factors include social aspects and the physical environment that can affect the experience and reporting of symptoms by the individual. In the present case scenario, Mrs. Lata is hospitalized for her cancer treatment; sleep wake cycle alteration, invasive procedures, bedridden condition have resulted in change in daily routine activities.

Suffering- Suffering refers to the degree of discomfort of an individual in relation to the symptom or group of symptoms. In the present scenario, symptoms such as burning and tingling sensation, muscle cramps and weakness have caused discomfort to the patient. Symptom experience can also be measured in terms of duration, quality and intensity.

Unpleasant symptoms- Unpleasant symptoms point out perceived changes in the expected functioning of the human body generally experienced as unpleasant. In the present scenario, unpleasant symptom can be those associated with peripheral neuropathy in addition to the symptoms due to the cancer itself.

Performance- Performance consists of the consequences or effect of the experience of the symptoms; it includes functional and cognitive aspects. In the present scenario, consequences refer to deviation in physical, emotional, functional, social/family well-being due to the disease condition and additional concerns associated with chemotherapy induced peripheral neuropathy.

Conclusion: TOUS is a middle range theory that can be utilized by the nursing professionals for assessing the unpleasant and bothersome symptoms experienced by the patients, due to disease condition or due to treatment related side effects. Nurses by getting deeper insight into the various symptom experiences of the patients can plan therapeutic interventions for minimizing the patient's distress and for enhancing their well-being.

Nurses can intervene early to prevent the development of unpleasant symptoms and to reduce their severity by modifying physiological, psychological and situational factors and their interactions. Early intervention by the nurses can result in lesser suffering and consequently better quality of life.

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest

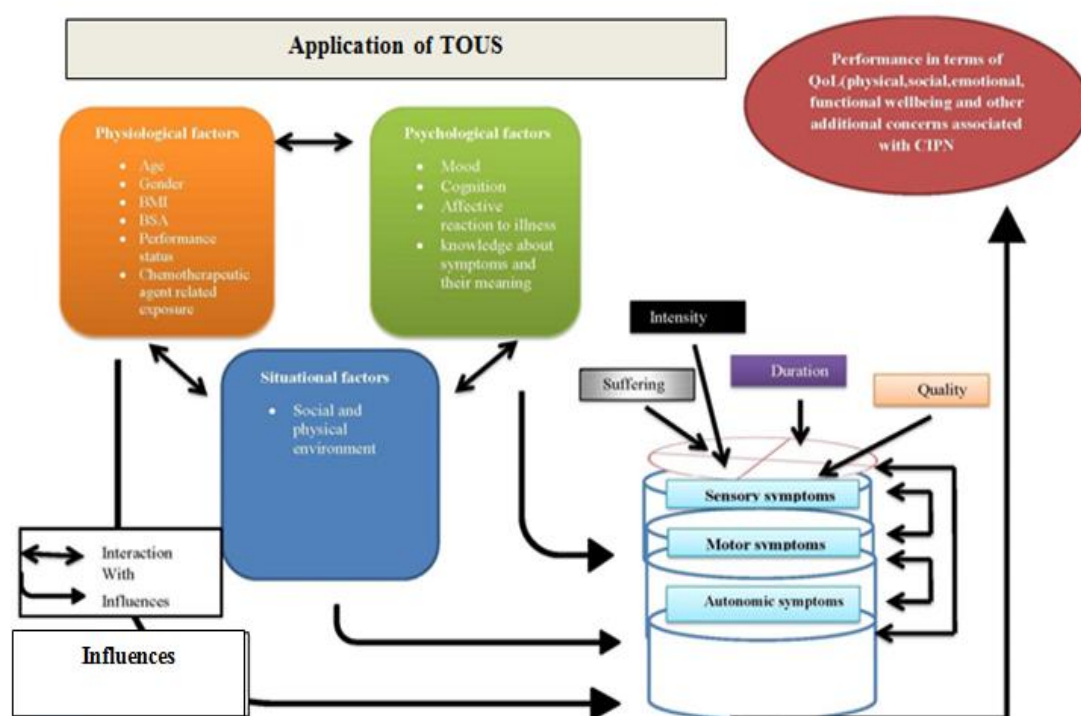


Figure 2: Application of TOUS

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