



## Mardi Smith

B.S., Nursing, University of Missouri-Columbia

M.S., Nursing Administration & Leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University

M.S., Community Agency Counseling, University of Memphis

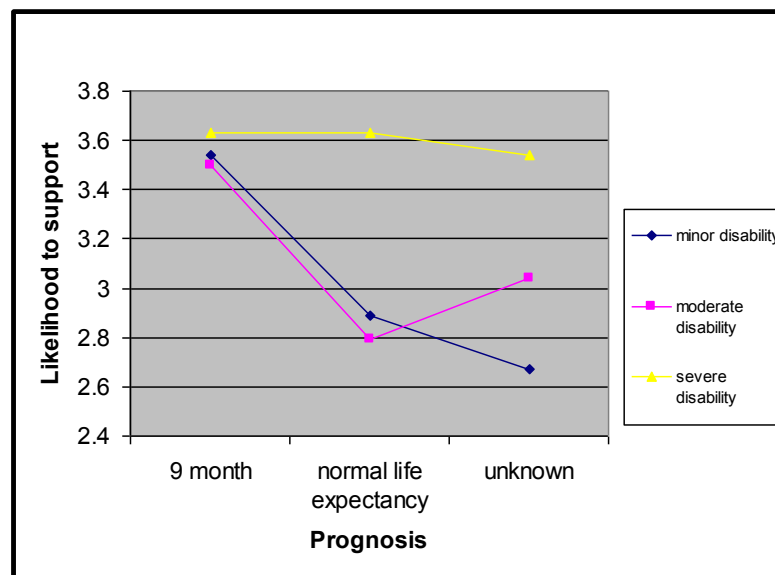
PhD, Counseling Psychology, University of Memphis

Smith, who is currently pursuing a doctorate in Counseling Psychology, won First Place at the 2008 Student Research Forum for her study titled “The Effects of Client Disability on Counselor Decisions within an End-of-Life Case Scenario”.

For her study, Smith presented 75 master’s and PhD candidates in Counseling and Educational Psychology with a series of written scenarios about a physically disabled person who was newly diagnosed with cancer and had made the decision not to seek treatment, thereby hastening death. Counselors were asked to indicate their level of support for the patient’s decision. In the three scenarios given to each participant, the level of disability – minor, moderate, or severe – varied. The prognosis, however, was held constant – the patient’s prognosis was either nine months to live, normal life expectancy, or unknown.

Smith found that the counselor’s likelihood to support the patient’s decision to refuse treatment declined dramatically when the person had a minor or moderate disability and was expected to have a normal life span compared to being given just 9 months to live (*Fig. 1*). The most interesting finding of her research, however, was that if the patient had a severe disability there was no significant change in the counselor’s likelihood to support refusal of treatment if the patient’s prognosis was 9 months to live or a normal life expectancy.

**Fig. 1** Interaction of prognosis of cancer with treatment and disability on counselor’s decision to support client’s decision to refuse medical treatment.



The findings, Smith said, “indicate there is a lot of educating to be done for counselors interacting with disabled patients. They need to overcome assumptions about the quality of life of severely disabled people.” She added, “Having been a clinical nurse and a nurse administrator and educator in my ‘first career’, I have always been interested in end-of-life issues. That interest was enhanced by my recent work with patients at the VA. I talked to men who were moderately to severely disabled who said their life had never been better.”

When she completes her PhD, Smith said she will continue her work with physically disabled people, citing her interest in “helping patients overcome the psychological effects of dealing with an accident, trauma, or an illness.”