Managing fears of recurrence in a breast cancer patient population – preliminary findings from an innovative group intervention led by clinical psychology and therapeutic radiography.  

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INTRODUCTION

Fear of cancer recurrence (FCR) is defined as the fear or worry that cancer will return, progress or metastasise. FCR is one of the most commonly reported problems and one of the most prevalent areas of unmet need for cancer survivors and their families (1). FCR can have a significant impact on quality of life (2) and can be implicated in treatment non-adherence, an inability to plan for the future (3) hyper-vigilance for symptom recurrence and the over-utilisation of medical and nursing resource.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) facilitates meaningful behaviour change through increasing psychological flexibility (psychological acceptance) and reduced avoidance (4). Consistent with ACT theory, psychological flexibility has been found to mediate important therapeutic outcomes (5, 6). ACT could be of benefit for those experiencing fear of cancer returning.

AIM

Based on the ACT Conquer Fear intervention (4), the authors have adopted the intervention as a 6-week group programme which includes both practical and emotional coping techniques for managing the ‘what if’ worries, women often confront after treatment has completed. The programme aims to reduce participants’ FCR and improve their overall coping capacity for emotional distress.

METHOD

The FCR intervention is assessed in terms of its feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness. Given that the intervention is based on an ACT approach, an outcome measure which assesses participants’ psychological flexibility is employed (CompACT). Consistent with ACT theory, psychological flexibility has been found to mediate important therapeutic outcomes, with higher levels of psychological flexibility being associated with lower levels of psychological distress and improved quality of life (Francis et al., 2016).

Evaluation Measures:

- Acceptability: patient satisfaction of group intervention (questionnaire/ focus group interviews)
- Fear of Cancer Recurrence (Fear of Cancer Recurrence Inventory, FCRI)
- Quality of life (Functional Assessment of Cancer Therapy - Breast Cancer, FACT-B)
- Psychological flexibility (CompACT)
- Psychological well-being (Anxiety, GAD-7; mood, PHQ-9)

Pre and post outcome measures are completed with all participants as well as follow up at 12 weeks. Within the first twelve months of the pilot project, seven cycles of the group programme were completed and the preliminary findings are presented below.

FEARS OF CANCER RECURRANCE

A comparison between pre and post scores indicate a slight reduction in fears of cancer recurrence however it is not statistically significant. Follow up scores at 12 weeks have yet to be collected and therefore will be interesting to ascertain whether over time, FCR is reduced.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY

Outcome data from the GAD-7 indicate that participants’ anxiety levels significantly reduced post intervention. On average, participants fell within the moderately severe range of anxiety pre-group and reduced to moderate levels of anxiety post-group.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, group participants described benefitting from the programme in helping them adjust emotionally after their active treatment finished. They spoke about how the peer support element in the programme as well as the practical information and ACT techniques increased their ability to tolerate uncertainty associated with fears of recurrence. It is envisaged that the lessons learned from this pilot project can inform how we deliver psychological support to breast cancer patients and support their emotional wellbeing throughout all stages of their cancer experience.

REFERENCES


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"The session discussing recurrence was frightening and focussed me where I didn't want to go, however it was this session I liked the most, it was very informative and gave me knowledge to take forward."

Beatson cancer patient, Glasgow