

A Comparison of Oncologists' and Women's Perceptions of the Benefits of a Supportive Expressive Group for Women with Advanced Breast Cancer

'Isn't it depressing?'

'You're not still in that group?'

Oncologist: 'The disadvantage of a group like this would be the loss of members and its impact for the rest of the group.'

Woman: 'Sharing the end stage of other women's disease has been a privilege ... it is part of the journey we all wonder/worry about and seeing other women deal with it gives you the inspiration that when your time comes you will be able to cope too.'

Studies of Group Interventions

Stage of disease (Simonton & Sherman)

Different types of groups are better suited to different stages of disease: short term/time limited structured information based groups better suited to newly diagnosed/primary cancer patients; longer term more supportive groups better suited to patients with advanced disease.

Professionally led vs peer support (Lieberman)

While less research undertaken re peer support groups than professional led groups, evidence suggests better outcomes from professionally led groups compared to peer support groups; professionally led groups tend to encourage more expression of emotion, particularly negative emotion, whereas peer support groups tend to discourage this.

Differences between participants and non-participants (Grande 2005)

Grande et al, compared cancer patients who attended a community peer support group in Cambridge, with patients who were not in a group but on the Cancer Registry. They found the significant predictors of group participation were: beliefs about the benefits of support groups, perceived support from important others regarding participation, an active approach to coping and lack of support from a special person. Interestingly, doctors' opinions about support group involvement were often not known, as patients mostly did not discuss membership with their doctors, and hence their views had to be excluded from the study. The authors argue that this implies that enhancing perceptions about the benefits of groups, for both consumers and health professionals, could result in increased participation in support group interventions.

Expression of negative emotion (Lieberman)

Emotional expression is seen to be important for adjusting to and coping with cancer; Supportive expressive group therapy SEG, as used in our group, has been one of the more successful therapies for improving mood, perception of pain and relieving stress. In peer run online support groups for women with breast cancer, Lieberman found the more women expressed anger and sadness, the lower their depression and higher QOL experienced; conversely, the more women expressed anxiety the higher their depression and lower their QOL. Lieberman concluded not all negative emotions are equal, and expression of negative emotions may not always be therapeutic. However we would argue that his findings suggest the need for 'containment' when expressing negative emotions such as fear and anxiety, and that this is more likely to be available within a professionally led group than a peer led group, online or otherwise.

Differences in coping strategies and psychosocial variables (Carver, Grande)

Carver found that 'adaptive' forms of coping, including fighting spirit/low helplessness were associated with support group participation, and conversely 'maladaptive' strategies such as denial, disengagement and emotional venting were less likely to lead to group participation.

In this Study we found:

- **100% Agreement amongst women and oncologists** that being in the group helped alleviate the sense of isolation as a result of the diagnosis

- Largest difference (78%/13%) on whether being in group helped improve control of physical symptoms. Does this reflect a more biological view by Oncologists? Are women referring to information gained in the group re better pain management?

- Oncologists were undecided or disagreed more, compared to women, on potential benefits. Does this mean they don't know about psychosocial needs of women?

For further information: wps2@bigpond.net.au