The Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program: A support group for individuals challenged by cancer

By Sharon A. Gordon

Abstract

The Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program at Centenary Health Centre (CCSWP) began as a program to help meet the needs of clients and their families by building upon their repertoire of coping strategies and improving their support network. As one component of the total treatment plan, this holistic program promotes self-responsibility for health, as well as sharing among those touched by cancer. The article describes the CCSWP program format and content; implementation of program objectives, program input from clients, and implications for clinical practice. Clients with cancer, and their families, are becoming more informed health care consumers and are asking for information regarding their health, and how they can best promote their own recovery. The CCSWP helps meet these needs.

Introduction

Current literature indicates that social support or support from others can impact on quality of life (Grant & Padilla, 1985, p. 66). This is well demonstrated in a cancer support group for individuals and their families, which was developed at Centenary Health Centre in 1991. The Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program (CCSWP) is a program designed to help meet the needs of clients and their families, to help them to build upon their repertoire of coping strategies, and to improve their support network.

The program was created in response to the needs of individuals attending the chemotherapy clinic. A number of clients approached oncology team members and requested that a support program for cancer patients and their families be developed at Centenary Health Centre.

CCSWP is sponsored by the oncology program at Centenary Health Centre and provides a structured series of weekly sessions for individuals, families, and friends touched by cancer. The program is promoted not merely to contribute to or to complement treatment, but as another component of the total treatment plan. The CCSWP is promoted in the chemotherapy clinic at Centenary Health Centre as a method to direct self-care and return control to the person, who accepts some responsibility for his own health. Clients are encouraged to work co-operatively and

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collaboratively with their oncologist and other health care professionals to take charge of their lives.

Through participation in the CCSWP, healing is promoted by recognizing that the diagnosis of cancer impacts on the whole person in mind, body and spirit. Through this holistic approach to health, the individual explores attitudes towards health and health promotion. The approach returns the focus of attention to the whole person, at a time when the individual may feel that their disease is the focus of attention.

The CCSWP was developed and implemented at Centenary Health Centre by the director of pastoral services and the clinical nurse specialist in oncology. The chief of staff and oncologist was a motivating force from its inception and encouraged many of his patients and their families to attend the program. In addition to programs offered in the community by the Canadian Cancer Society, individual clients and their families expressed the desire to attend "a support group" at the centre where they were receiving treatment.

Guiding principles

The theoretical basis for the "Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program" is found in the work of such theorists as Dr. Lawrence LeShan (1974), Dr. O. Carl Simonton (1976), Stephanie Simonton (1976), Dr. Herbert Benson (1985), Dr. Bernie Siegel (1986) and Sheila Pennington (1988).

Themes

Wellness and health are themes throughout the program. Wellness and health can be explored in the context of an individual's experience of having cancer. The individual experiences various degrees of wellness, and various degrees of illness throughout the course of cancer and its treatment. If health is defined as the fullest realization of human potential and an individual's ability to perform his roles (Frank-Stromberg 1986), then having cancer should not preclude being as healthy as possible. Participants are encouraged to examine and reflect upon their own attitudes towards health and illness.

LE PROGRAMME DE SANTÉ ET DE STRATÉGIES D'ADAPTATION FACE AU CANCER: UN GROUPE DE SOUTIEN POUR LES PERSONNES RELEVANT LE DÉFI DU CANCER

ABRÉGÉ

Le Programme de santé et de stratégies d'adaptation face au cancer (CCSWP) offert au Centenary Health Centre était au départ un programme qui s'efforçait de répondre aux besoins des clients et de leurs familles en développant leur répertoire de stratégies d'adaptation et en améliorant leur réseau de soutien. En tant que composante du régime de traitement global, ce programme holistique fait la promotion de la responsabilité personnelle en matière de santé et favorise les échanges entre les personnes touchées par le cancer. L'article décrit le format et le contenu du programme; la mise en oeuvre des objectifs du programme; les commentaires des patients et les implications au niveau de la pratique clinique. Les clients - et les familles - sont en train de devenir des consommateurs de soins de santé de mieux en mieux informés et ils veulent de l'information au sujet de leur santé et savoir comment ils peuvent faciliter leur propre guérison. Le Programme aide à répondre à ces besoins.

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Program objectives

The program objectives of the "Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program" are the following:

1. To facilitate the healing process, as the program can be seen as a component of the total treatment plan which is geared towards healing.
2. To assist patients and families to further develop their repertoire of coping skills, to enhance their ability to cope with cancer and its treatment.
- 3.a. To focus on a holistic approach to patient care, in order to improve quality of life, family functioning, and personal growth and development of individuals and families confronted with cancer.
- 3.b. To provide an opportunity, apart from the chemotherapy clinic, for outpatients and their families coping with cancer to give and receive support from others, and in so doing develop a network of support.

There are key points for implementation of program objectives (see Table One for details).

Program content

The schedule for program sessions includes the following topics: The healing power of humour; fear and stress (relaxation and visualization techniques); nutrition; the family as a team;

communication skills; communication and the family; meaning, purpose and values; and beliefs and healing.

At the beginning of each session participants are encouraged to share an amusing story or positive event in their lives from the past week, in order to affirm life's simple pleasures. This is followed by a brief presentation (20 minutes) of one of the topics listed. Questions and comments from participants are encouraged. Following a break, participants form small groups for discussion of the evening's topic. Facilitators from the oncology team circulate among the small groups to facilitate discussion. It is in the small groups that interaction among individuals and families challenged by cancer begins. Participants have an opportunity to share feelings and to provide one another with emotional support.

Throughout the program, participants are introduced to such self-quietening techniques as creative visualization and relaxation exercises that produce significant physiological benefits such as lowered blood pressure and heart rate. Participants have the opportunity to practise these techniques during weekly sessions, and to add to their repertoire of coping strategies.

The resources of the multidisciplinary oncology team continue to be crucial for the ongoing evolution of the CCSWP. Resource professionals, including an enterostomal nurse specialist, a chaplain, and a dietitian, continue to add depth to the present Cancer Coping

Table One: Implementation of program objectives

1. To facilitate the healing process as the program can be seen as a component of the total treatment plan which is geared towards healing:

- introduction and advertisement of the CCSWP in the chemotherapy clinic by the oncologist, clinical nurse specialist and nursing staff
- inpatients receiving chemotherapy and their relatives were also invited to attend
- the program is promoted as a treatment option whereby individuals take responsibility for the development of attitudes and behaviours that promote health and healing.

2. To assist clients and their families to further develop their repertoire of coping skills, to enhance their ability to cope with cancer and its treatment.

- participants are encouraged to identify their own strengths or inner resources such as strength of will, creativity, sense of humour, etc.
- participants are reminded of the way that they have coped successfully with past problems or difficulties and are encouraged to feel confident in applying these strategies to the cancer experience
- participants are guided through further developing communication skills
- participants are introduced to relaxation, visualization, and meditation techniques and are assisted with practising these during sessions

3.a. To focus on a holistic approach to patient care, in order to maximize quality of life, family functioning and personal growth and development of individuals and families confronted with cancer.

3.b. To provide an opportunity, apart from the chemotherapy clinic, for individuals and families coping with cancer to give and receive support from others, and to develop a network of support.

- during an evening session from 7-8:30pm, participants are provided with a warm comfortable atmosphere where feelings can be vented and shared
- smaller groups for discussion enable caregivers to share with other caregivers and care receivers to share with other care receivers.

Table Two: Participants' ideas for program development

Some participants expressed the following needs for the program:

- for contact with people who have problems in common, because "others" may fear talking to us or even fear seeing us
- for sharing unique or specific methods used by individuals to rebuild self-esteem (even though others might perceive you as never having lost it), as the reaction of others can be negative and result in diminishing of the ego
- for "care givers" and "care receivers" to share in small groups
- for "wellness" to be fostered through laughter/humour
- for "sharing" to support one another (partnerships in treatment)
- for visualization techniques to be conducted
- for the answer to the question "why" in medicine (eg. on the initiative of new treatment, in order to gain some control)
- for relaxation and meditation techniques to be taught
- for an opportunity to bring out the "child" within (reasons for actions)
- for a forum of fears and to reveal, analyze, and share resolutions to problems
- for an opportunity to learn how "cancer" affects family/friends (how to "cope" and how to help them cope)
- other assorted suggestions from the whole group included: yoga, tai-chi, a biofeedback machine, the compilation of data on cancer success stories for a research project, and for "cancer scares" to be eliminated from obituaries

Strategies and Wellness Program experience at Centenary Health Centre. The current program at Centenary Health Centre is now called "Take Charge".

Evaluation of the attendance, content presentation, and program process have been helpful to meet the changing needs of program participants. Participants are surveyed by questionnaires throughout the program to elicit their ideas for program development (see Table Two for details). As the program continues, new facilitators, drawn from the oncology team, attend the program as observers and are trained by CCSWP facilitators. Further program evaluation needs to discover who attends the program if those clients attending the program have fewer problems and make fewer phone calls and appointments to oncology health team members. The needs of those not using the program should also be considered.

Implications for clinical practice

Clients and their families touched by cancer, like many other Canadians, are becoming more educated and more informed health care consumers. They are anxious to obtain the most accurate information regarding their health, current treatment options, and how they can best help themselves toward recovery. In this respect, individuals are demanding the opportunity to be active participants in their own health care.

Today, many health consumers of cancer care are not only interested in self-care practices to promote their own recovery, but in attending a support and information group that promotes these practices from within the institution where they are receiving treatment. Health care professionals are obligated to attempt to use resources wisely to meet the service requirements of their clients.

The cost of running the CCSWP was kept to a minimum with facilitators volunteering their time after hours, and with the hospital providing the meeting place and audio-visual equipment. For the entire program, there was a charge of \$15.00 per family to cover additional program costs such as the purchase of reading materials and videotapes for the program library, and refreshments.

Providing clients and their families with health care information concerning health promotion practices in a supportive environment promotes self-responsibility for health care. Providing clients and their families with additional strategies to add to their current repertoire of coping strategies promotes confidence in coping abilities (eg, the introduction of practice sessions on guided visual imagery, meditation, and relaxation techniques) and promotes individual coping skills. Providing clients and their families with the opportunity to share a common denominator, the cancer experience, confronts the very heart of cancer fear.

The program objectives are compatible with goals for oncology nursing practice. The program helps to ensure that clients and their families are cared for holistically by nurse facilitators. Sometimes a client's physical needs become the focus of much of the nursing care in the chemotherapy clinic. The CCSWP creates an environment where the nurse can help to also meet the emotional and spiritual

needs of the client. In the CCSWP, the nurse facilitator promotes lifestyle adjustments and optimal quality of life, as the individual and family cope with the chemotherapy experience. The CCSWP enables the nurse facilitator to practise family-centered care. Through supportive nursing care, the individual is able to mobilize emotional and physical defence mechanisms and further develop a repertoire of coping skills.

In conclusion, the "Cancer Coping Strategies and Wellness Program" has met its program objectives. As a treatment option, it has promoted and facilitated the healing process. It has assisted patients and their families to further develop their repertoire of coping skills, to enhance their ability to cope with cancer and its treatment. Through a holistic approach to patient care, it has maximized quality of life, family functioning, and personal growth and development of individuals and their families confronted with cancer. It has provided an environment where individuals and families could meet to give and receive support, and in so doing develop a network of support. Some patients on rigorous chemotherapy regimes, who were well enough to attend a few sessions, found that the program helped them to cope with their disease and the treatment experience. Patients and their families did, however, report that it was beneficial for them to attend as many sessions as possible.

These conclusions have been substantiated and validated by users of the program. At the completion of the 11 sessions, participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire. One of the questions read: "Did the program help you cope with your disease and treatment?" Here are some of the participants' responses:

"Definitely! My entire family is better able to cope. As caregivers we sometimes feel very alone."

"I would say definitely. This program has wellness as its focus and the approach is positive. Any coming together of people who share a common need has the potential of being an experience of growth. The thrust of this program is that we have some control over the situation. Dealing with the mind and emotions helps the body because we are "one". This program helps us do that."

"When I first received my diagnosis, I was frightened and upset. However, through dealing with the subject intensely during the coping program, I realize that cancer is not necessarily a death sentence. It's a warning that things need to be changed in our life but we have learned that if we can change our attitude, we can accomplish anything. We can survive and there are many resources we can tap into in order to live a full rich life, despite the diagnosis of cancer."

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