

The Role of Psychosocial Support and Digital Psychosocial Intervention in Empowering Breast Cancer Patients

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Abstract

The purpose of this review was to investigate the latest studies regarding patient psychosocial support, psychosocial interventions that provide relief for breast cancer patients, and the effectiveness of digital interventions.

The methodology followed was the literature review of recent years through electronic databases (pubmed, scopus, google scholar) regarding the role of psychosocial interventions in breast cancer patients.

A growing number of studies have highlighted the importance of psychosocial interventions for both breast cancer patients and their caregivers. Psychosocial interventions and digital psychosocial interventions are highly effective in improving patients' emotional distress, reducing anxiety, increasing mental resilience, empowering them and improving their quality of life. Digital interventions provide several advantages to breast cancer patients. Especially during the pandemic, breast cancer patients due to the strict restrictions, accessibility to mental health structures was limited. Empowering breast cancer patients reduces emotional distress, increases self-esteem and self-efficacy, enhances disease awareness, adaptation to disease, and treatment and disease management.

Keywords: Breast Cancer; Psychosocial Support; Digital Psychosocial Intervention; Empowerment

Introduction

Nowadays, breast cancer is the most common type of gynecological cancer, and it is the first cause of death in women from cancer. 19% of breast cancer cases concern women under the age of 50 [1-9].

Each year breast cancer affects 2.1 million women worldwide [10,11]. In 2000, 1.5 million new cases of breast cancer were diagnosed worldwide. In 2012, over 1.67 million new cases of breast cancer were recorded. In 2020, there were 2.3 million new cases of breast cancer, representing 11.7% of all cancers. While in 2050 it is estimated that it will reach 3.2 new cases. In the five years between 2015 - 2020, 7.8 million women were diagnosed with breast cancer. In the US 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer. A study in 40 European countries showed that breast cancer is the main cause of death in women. In Greece, every year 4500 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed and it is the most common cause of cancer. Five-year survival rates for breast cancer patients are approximately 80% - 90% if no metastasis occurs and only 40% for metastatic cancer [8,12-14].

Breast cancer is responsible for 25% of all cancer cases and 15% of all deaths in women [15].

Several studies in recent years demonstrate the psychological and emotional dimension of breast cancer in women, especially in younger age groups. Women suffering from breast cancer experience a multitude of painful physical and psychological symptoms that have a significant impact on their mental health and quality of life. Cancer affects women negatively on many levels, such as social, psychological, financial and professional. More comparatively, women experience pain, fatigue, physical problems, emotional distress, anguish, uncertainty, frustration, anger, anxiety, depression, fear of abandonment, fear of recurrence, worry about pain, sexual dysfunction, sleep disturbances, low self-esteem, worry about their self-image, death anxiety, difficulties and dysfunctions with the relationships of significant others and the social environment, concern regarding their career and financial situation, etc [12,16-18].

Therefore, the psychological and psychosocial support of breast cancer patients is considered necessary. Patients are increasingly expressing emotional support needs, and psychosocial support interventions are effective and empowering patients.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this review was to investigate the latest studies regarding patient psychosocial support, psychosocial interventions that provide relief for breast cancer patients, and the effectiveness of digital interventions.

Results

Contemporary data regarding the psychosocial interventions of patients with breast cancer from the beginning of the diagnosis

Psychosocial support for women suffering from breast cancer has been found to be very useful and effective.

Interventions based on mindfulness, expression of emotions and other psychosocial interventions have a very positive effect on improving the emotional distress of breast cancer patients [12]. Psychosocial interventions aimed at addressing fear of recurrence and emotional distress can improve the quality of life of women with breast cancer [12,20].

It is worth noting that a study conducted in Japan on 74 breast cancer patients showed that cognitive therapy through mindfulness (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) is quite effective in managing the psychological effects of cancer in women. More specifically, through mindfulness, women's emotional distress, anxiety, depression, fear of relapse and fatigue are significantly reduced, while their well-being and quality of life increases [21,22].

In addition, an intervention program created for the purpose of being performed by nurses for breast cancer patients showed that women significantly improved their depressive and anxiety symptoms, their daily life, their roles, etc [23]. In addition, they manifested fewer physical symptoms, such as pain, nausea, etc [24,25]. Through cognitive techniques, the patient is encouraged to perceive dysfunctional behaviors and distortions to manage anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms [22].

In addition, psychosocial interventions improved significant post-traumatic stress symptoms in women with breast cancer [26].

According to Spiegel and Riba (2015), the effective treatment and management of anxiety, depression and other psychological consequences of breast cancer is achieved by a set of psychosocial interventions, through psychodynamic, cognitive, psychoeducational, interpersonal and existential therapy [22].

According to a meta-analysis, regarding the critical preoperative and postoperative period, psychosocial interventions appear to be quite beneficial in breast cancer patients undergoing mastectomy. More specifically, thirty-two studies highlighted the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions in breast cancer patients after surgery. According to the meta-analysis, psychosocial interventions, such as

counseling, psychoeducation, cognitive technique, supportive therapy, etc. significantly improved anxiety, depression, quality of life, emotional distress, body image, sleep disturbance, sexual function, self-esteem in breast cancer patients after surgery [27].

In addition, group psychosocial interventions (such as psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, cognitive, etc.) are quite effective in breast cancer patients, especially in the management of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Through group psychotherapy, patients are empowered, acquire skills to deal with anxiety and depressive symptoms, enhance social support, emotional expression, family support and finally improve communication between significant others and with health professionals [22].

A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in the management of anxiety and depressive symptoms found that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) significantly improved anxiety in women with breast cancer. In contrast, depression and quality of life did not show significant improvement over a period of four months and longer [28].

Furthermore, an improvement in sexual function was also observed in women who had undergone cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) [29]. Psychoeducational interventions, counseling for women with breast cancer and couples, psychotherapy, group therapy as well as couple therapy demonstrate a significant improvement in sexual mood and positive body image [12,30,31].

In addition, couple therapy is effective because it significantly improves communication between the couple, while at the same time reducing anxiety and negative mood in both patients of breast cancer and their partners [32].

Finally, psychoeducation and counseling support for breast cancer patients strengthens women's resilience and improves their mental health [33]. Psychosocial interventions aimed at solving current problems in breast cancer patients and the management of stress, fatigue, etc. significantly improve their quality of life [34].

In addition, the family environment is not ready and properly trained to manage and adapt to the disease but also to handle all the actions that a patient needs from the moment of diagnosis [11]. Training caregivers in caregiving skills as well as supporting them seems to be very useful both for them and for patients with breast cancer [35].

Intervention, support, and education for families and caregivers of women with breast cancer increased their cancer knowledge and self-efficacy while mitigating the adverse affect and emotional distress of their family members. This fosters a more active participation of caregivers in patient care, a constructive approach, better support for them, an increase in their quality of life and an effective management of their stress and psychological distress [36].

More specifically, psychoeducation and empowerment groups can play an important positive role in stress management, emotion expression, and quality of life among family members of breast cancer patients [10,37,38].

Psychoeducation and support groups appear to be effective and comforting for both breast cancer patients and their family caregivers. Psychoeducation and empowerment groups contribute to the emotional support of patients and their families, the reduction of psychological distress, the management of stress, the increase of self-efficacy and resilience, the expression of emotions and the increase of their quality of life [37,39].

In addition, studies support that the burden of caregivers of breast cancer patients can be reduced with appropriate psychosocial interventions, thereby increasing caregivers' well-being and quality of life. The organization of psychosocial support and psychoeducation programs contributes to reducing the burden and discomfort of caregivers and to improving the quality of life of patients. Finally, it teaches patients and caregivers strategies for managing stress and emotions [10,13,40,41].

Supportive care is very important for both breast cancer patients and family caregivers and should be affordable and available to all. Aiming in this way to ensure and improve the quality of life of patients and the family environment [42,43].

In addition, targeted interventions regarding increasing mental resilience in families of women with breast cancer, improve adaptation to the disease, quality of life of themselves and caregivers [44]. Interventions to strengthen family resilience also significantly improve post-traumatic stress symptoms experienced by families after breast cancer. Family caregivers play a vital role in patient treatment, and interventions to enhance resilience are equally important [45].

Healthcare professionals should include the whole family in breast cancer care, so that they assess the needs of the family and ensure that psychosocial interventions are provided by the interdisciplinary community and psycho-oncology [46,47].

Finally, the programs and strategic interventions are mostly supportive for both patients and their families, aimed at expressing and managing their emotions, managing stress, gaining meaning after illness, adherence to treatment, adaptation to illness and self-negotiation, timely information, etc [48].

The role of empowerment in patients with breast cancer

The empowerment of patients and caregivers has brought about very significant benefits in enhancing the treatment of oncology patients and at the same time in reducing the burden on caregivers. Empowerment is informing patients and caregivers about their illness and treatment [49,50]. Patient empowerment aims to provide an individualized plan of care where patients are not passive recipients of their care and develop appropriate skills, confidence and knowledge to respond to their illness and treatment [50].

Empowerment can be achieved by enhancing the patient's health knowledge, respecting the patient's needs and personality, cultivating a climate of trust through active listening, creating motivation, providing psychological support, developing skills, ensuring participation of patients in the decision-making process. The aim of empowerment programs is to reduce psychological distress, manage patients' anxiety and depressive symptoms, positive attitude and adaptation to treatment and acceptance of their illness, manage fear of recurrence of cancer, the limitation of social isolation, the improvement of relationships and the quality of life of patients [50].

Empowerment is related to the increase in self-esteem, self-perception and self-efficacy of patients, to better awareness and adaptation to the disease, to compliance with treatment, to emotional maturity, to satisfaction and to an increase in the quality of life of patients [50].

An intervention program to enhance the empowerment of women with breast cancer is self-help groups where women regain control of their disease, the belief that they can manage difficulties and the expectation to cope with the negative accompanying symptoms of their disease [51].

Finally, the empowerment of caregivers is carried out in the information of caregivers, in their psychological support, in strengthening their role, in communication, in the management of emotional distress, in the strengthening of their self-esteem and self-efficacy, in the expression of emotions and at the same time, they improved the quality of their lives [50].

The need to develop digital interventions for breast cancer patients

In recent years, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has resulted in people being confined to their homes, which has also made it quite difficult to provide psychosocial support to breast cancer patients.

The impact of the pandemic on women with breast cancer has been significant, increasing patients' emotional distress, anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is deemed necessary to have a different support framework for breast cancer patients during the pandemic cri-

sis, such as digital interventions. First of all, to take advantage of online interventions that can be implemented remotely and are effective in managing the anxiety and emotional distress of breast cancer patients. Web conferencing can prove to be a satisfactory solution for the psychological support of patients, reducing their emotional discomfort, fear, social isolation, anxiety and the accompanying effects of cancer and the pandemic. In addition, the contribution of online support groups is instrumental in increasing social support and increasing patients' quality of life. Likewise, telephone supportive care [52-58].

Online support groups have significant advantages because people from remote areas who are socially can use them excluded, they are easy to use, they are flexible and can be joined more easily by people with mobility difficulties, they are easier for people who have social anxiety, are just as effective as lifelong support groups. For example a study by Winzelberg., *et al.* (2003) showed that online support groups offer relief from anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress [59]. Similarly, a comprehensive systematic review in 2016 showed that online interventions can meet the needs of breast cancer patients [60].

Finally, telephone psychosocial interventions improve anxiety and depression as well as quality of life according to an intervention study [61].

Discussion and Conclusion

Breast cancer patients experience emotional distress, affecting the quality of life of both patients and their caregivers.

This review aimed to highlight current psychosocial interventions that are effective in breast cancer patients.

A growing number of studies in recent years highlight a significant number of psychosocial interventions that are effective in managing patients' illness and emotional distress. Psychosocial support relieves breast cancer patients, empowers them and improves their quality of life. The empowerment of women is considered necessary so that they respond effectively to their treatment, to the management of the disease and the adaptation of the patients to the disease and finally, to the improvement of their functionality, especially of the patients of the reproductive period.

Especially with the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, the need for remote psychological support for breast cancer patients emerged. In general, digital psychosocial interventions have been shown to be as effective as in-person interventions, capitalizing on the significant advantages they provide.

Therefore, it is deemed necessary to create specialized psycho-oncological support centers for breast cancer patients, made up of suitably qualified personnel to meet the needs of breast cancer patients and their caregivers. The creation of digital intervention or tele-consultation centers will enable the accessibility of more patients, especially patients in remote areas where access is impossible.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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