TRIAL SUMMARY: Online support challenges assumptions about superiority of face-to-face support.


CancerChatCanada is an internet-based service designed to meet professional standards of practice, ensure patient safety and overcome barriers to accessing support regardless of participant type. Using mixed methods (a descriptive study and 2 randomized, controlled trials) to evaluate the initiative, this study reports on quantitative and qualitative outcomes from 102 interviews conducted with patients, caregivers and survivors. Over a 45-month period between January 2008 and October 2011, 51 online support groups (OSGs) were conducted with an average of 7 enrollees per group. Patient-perceived impacts and benefits relate to themes of empowerment and self-care, freedom to speak openly, and shared understanding and belongingness. Quantitative results indicate that time-limited online support groups reduced illness intrusiveness for young breast cancer survivors at 3 months followup, suggesting a “sleeper effect.” The authors concluded that the results of the pilot and randomized controlled trials nested within this program show promise for online support groups, and that the data demonstrate that professionally-led OSGs represent a clinically meaningful option for delivering psychosocial support regardless of participant type.

COMMENTARY: In 1964, Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message,” meaning that information outcome is impacted not only by its content, but also by how it is transmitted. Until recently, psychotherapy, in individual or group format, only used the medium of face-to-face encounters. Stephen and associates are pioneers who are testing the revolutionary use of the internet in professionally-facilitated OSGs for individuals impacted by cancer, and examining the ways in which this new medium shapes support group processes and outcomes.

The innovative pan-Canadian internet-based psychosocial oncology program, www.CancerChatCanada.ca, was launched in 2008 by Stephen and colleagues. It offers OSGs that meet once per week, for 10-12 weeks, for 90-minute live text-based chats. This service is supplemented with additional options, such as access to discussion boards and private chats with group leaders. To date, this platform has provided service to 400+ patients, survivors and family caregivers, in over 65 groups. Unique elements of this platform are that it is a “gated community,” accessible by referral only, without access for vendors or voyeurs. More important, all chats are professionally-led and thus controlled for potential privacy violations, dissemination of erroneous information, or unchecked flaming (i.e. hostile behaviour). This platform is also distinguished from other online support programs in its commitment to developing protocols, standards of care, standardized training for facilitators, as well as ongoing peer supervision. Research and program evaluation is embedded within this platform and all participants provide informed consent to take part in research.

Stephen et al developed a comprehensive research program to support rigour in the evaluation of this clinical service. To date, they completed a qualitative pilot study, in which both ongoing users and dropouts were interviewed, and quantitative studies, including 2 randomized controlled trials. The preliminary quantitative findings offer some support to the therapeutic benefits of the online resource by demonstrating pre-post improvement in relevant outcomes such as depression and illness intrusiveness in OSG participants. Moreover, their qualitative research provides valuable insight into some of the benefits of this online support service. These preliminary findings, if corroborated, may challenge assumptions about the superiority of traditional face-to-face professional support.

The findings from Stephen et al suggest that online technology reduces barriers to accessing professional psychosocial care. It has superior outreach capabilities for those who are socially, physically or geographically isolated. The majority of users were living in rural areas and had no previous counseling history for cancer-related distress. Most users stated that the online support platform was the only feasible way for them to access professional care.

The qualitative pilot study also revealed that the internet medium may entail benefits that go beyond increased accessibility. For example, it reveals that participants’ ability to stay in their own personal environments during the live group chats contributes to an increased sense of safety and comfort, in contrast to visits in an institutional setting, which are associated with a sense of alienation and rush. This increased sense of safety and comfort may help engage those who
typically avoid seeking help. Another surprising observation is that the text-based platform, which was developed to allow access to those with low bandwidth networks, shows unique advantages. This is because the act of writing is perceived as therapeutic and enhancing reflection. Thus, the medium of live chats may enrich psychosocial support processes because of the therapeutic power of the written word, also documented previously by Pennebaker.\(^1\)

In addition, the text-based platform provides an increased sense of privacy and semi-anonymity, and allowed participants to discuss difficult emotions more freely than in a face-to-face context. These findings are supported by a large body of research on computer-mediated communication, which demonstrate that text-only communications can be more intimate and pro-social than traditional communications and that the lack of social and visual cues creates unique patterns of high self-disclosure,\(^2\) “hyperpersonal”\(^3\) communication,\(^4\) and “benign disinhibition”\(^5\) of social restrictions. These positive communication patterns are formed because of, not despite, the limitations of the internet medium, and are further maintained and enhanced because the live chats are professionally-led. The support group leaders are invaluable in making sure that patterns of high self-disclosure and disinhibition remain safe.

It is important to support Stephen et al’s findings with future research. Their qualitative findings suggest that OSGs involve unique processes and outcomes that do not exist in traditional support groups. However, it is important to remember that these findings are based on interviews with participants who had no previous experience with traditional forms of psychotherapy. A careful comparison between the processes and outcomes of OSG vs traditional support groups is called for. This can be achieved using a randomized controlled trial design comparing online and traditional formats of professionally-led support groups for individuals impacted by cancer. Such comparisons may also help determine who is more likely to benefit from each. For example, it is possible that individuals with cancer who experience a greater sense of stigmatization would benefit more from the semi-anonymity that an OSG provides.

Stephen et al’s findings also raise interesting questions for future research. For example, it is worthwhile to examine the e-therapist’s experience and how it may differ from face-to-face therapy. Most important, to what extent can e-therapists diagnose mental disorders that may require additional care given the lack of social and visual cues in text-based chats? Another interesting question is how do support groups that use online videoconferencing differ from both text-only chats and traditional face-to-face encounters?

Future research and clinical outreach can also explore possibilities for using the online medium for more diverse hard-to-reach populations, i.e. men, older adults, and minority groups with cultural and language barriers. As Stephen et al demonstrate, a mixed-method research program, which is embedded within the clinical service, may be best suited to investigate issues related to emerging transmission technologies in psychosocial oncology intervention work.

As e-therapy for cancer patients develops, it is important to establish standards of practice, licensure mechanisms, and training and monitoring practices. Research on the benefits and processes of e-therapy for individuals impacted by cancer is essential to the development of practice guidelines and policies.\(^6\)

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**IN BRIEF**

**Already known**
- Online support groups have been suggested as a means of overcoming barriers to accessing psychosocial support.

**What this study showed**
- Text-only professionally-led OSGs have unique and unexpected benefits that go beyond increased accessibility.

**Next steps**
- Further studies are needed to examine the efficacy of online support, establish evidence-based e-therapy for cancer patients, and inform standards of care.