

Breast cancer

BODY IMAGE DISTURBANCE AND SEXUALITY FOLLOWING TREATMENT

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TRIAL SUMMARY: Group therapy to address body image disturbance and sexual function

Esplen MJ, Wong J, Warner E, Toner B. Can we fix what we've broken? Randomized controlled trial of a group therapy to address body image disturbance and sexuality following treatment for breast cancer. CAPO 2014. Abstract B-228.

This prospective randomized controlled study tested a group intervention for body image disturbance and problems with sexual functioning following treatment for breast cancer (BCa). With a 2:1 randomization, 128 women received the intervention and 65 formed a control group. The intervention included 8 weeks of group therapy to promote emotional expression of difficulties with body image, and to provide coping strategies and psychoeducation. The control group received routine clinical care and reading materials. Twelve standardized measures of body image and self-image, quality of life (QOL), and sexual functioning were completed at baseline, 8 weeks, 6 months and 1 year. The primary outcomes were body image and self-image, while secondary outcomes included items of psychosocial functioning (mood, mental adjustment, QOL, sexual functioning, relationship functioning, coping and self-silencing). The intervention was guided by Cash's cognitive-behavioural model of body image.¹

Demographic data were presented as well as preliminary results: two measures of body image (Body Image Scale [BIS], Body Image after Breast Cancer Scale [BIBC]), one measure of psychosocial functioning (Functional Assessment of Cancer Therapy for Breast Cancer QOL [FACT-B]) and one measure of sexual functioning (Female Sexual Function Index [FSFI]).

The average age was 50 years, 63% were married, 82% were in menopause, 60% had a regular sexual partner, 62% had a mastectomy and 17% had breast reconstruction. Compared to similar populations, there was a high prevalence of body image disturbance, lower adjustment levels, poorer QOL, and decreased sexual functioning at baseline. Post-intervention results showed that the intervention group had a statistically significant improvement in body image and body stigma compared to the control group, with results maintained at 6 and 12 months. Sexual functioning improved over time in the intervention group, but the difference from controls did not reach statistical significance.

The authors conclude that the intervention of the group support program was effective in addressing body image disturbance and contributed to improved sexual functioning in women following treatment for BCa.

COMMENTARY: Whereas the majority of women treated for BCa show good adjustment, a subset of women has persistent long-term psychosocial distress^{2,3} including body

image disturbance⁴ and problems in sexual functioning.⁵ Few intervention studies exist in body image adjustment,⁶ and this is the first trial to evaluate a group intervention to facilitate adaptation using guided imagery and psychoeducation.

Guided imagery has been shown to be beneficial for psychosocial issues such as anxiety and pain in the perioperative context.⁷ The group-based guided imagery/psychoeducational intervention is a novel approach to body image improvement, with psychoeducation facilitating the identification and development of women's expectations unrestricted by gender roles and cultural norms. Results specific to gender roles and socialization are not available at this time. However, the psychoeducation component is integral to the delivery of the intervention and it is unknown if preliminary benefits are due to the guided imagery, educational components or a combination. Evidence supports the use of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) interventions for addressing the adjustment to body image concerns in BCa.⁶ There is limited research regarding educational interventions, but preliminary results on their benefit are promising.^{6,8}

Patient concerns regarding sexual functioning were

IN BRIEF

Already known

- A subset of women treated for breast cancer experience body image disturbance and problems with sexual function.
- Evidence supports interventions using cognitive behavioural therapy.

What this study showed

- The sample had a high prevalence of body image disturbance, lower adjustment levels, poorer quality of life, and decreased sexual functioning at baseline compared to similar populations.
- The intervention group had a statistically significant improvement in body image and body stigma, which was maintained at 6 months and 1 year.
- Sexual functioning improved over time in the intervention group, but did not reach statistical significance.

Next steps

- Complete study data will be reported.
- Sexual functioning data will be analyzed by relationship subgroups.
- Intervention format will be expanded to address additional sexual function concerns.

LANDMARKS

addressed by the intervention, though statistical significance was not reached. Going forward, the authors suggest the sexual functioning data will be analyzed by subgroups (married, common-law, those with opportunities for casual sexual encounters) rather than assessing sexual functioning independent of relationships. Consideration is also being given to expanding the intervention to 10 weeks to address additional sexual functioning concerns.

The trial supports use of a novel psychosocial intervention to address body image and self-image among women posttreatment. By targeting dysfunctional cognition and emotion in patients with long-term body image concerns, combined with education to increase patient knowledge, this intervention has the potential to increase psychosocial wellbeing in a cost-effective format. A challenge will be to offer it to the right women at the right time. The trial is a welcome addition to the limited literature on adjustment to body disruption in BCa.

References:

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