

Exploring Wellness Coaching and Traditional Group Support for Breast Cancer Survivors: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Comparison of effectiveness of wellness coaching (WC) and traditional social support for breast cancer survivors (BCS) in improving their overall quality of life. **Methods:** Twenty subjects received WC intervention for 3 months while 10 BCS were members of a long standing traditional support group of 6 years. Survey measures at baseline and 3 months included: *Hospital Anxiety & Depression Scale, Exercise Stage Assessment and Process of Change, Quality of Life Patient/Cancer Survivor and Self-Efficacy Scales*. **Results:** A paired sample t-test was used to compare baseline and 3 month survey results in each group independently. Significant differences in the depression subscale of the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) ($p=0.05$) and physical quality of life (QOL) ($p=0.002$) for the group receiving the coaching intervention. No significant difference was found in the social support group; however, the majority of surveys showed positive trends. **Conclusions:** Our preliminary results show a significant improvement in the depression subscale of the HADS, as well as the physical domain of QOL for those participating in WC. Further research is needed to ascertain specificity of group vs individual support along the continuum of cancer survivorship in order to facilitate optimal outcomes. A randomized clinical trial is needed to confirm the impact of WC vs social group support over time. **Implications for Rehabilitation Specialists:** WC appears to be beneficial for BCS and observations may help guide rehabilitation specialists in further clinical application of WC to deliver and provide substantial program support to survivors without concern of time, distance, or location.

Key Words: breast cancer, survivorship, wellness coaching, social support

INTRODUCTION

There are nearly 12 million cancer survivors in the United States; 2.4 of those are women diagnosed and treated for breast cancer.¹ According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), an estimated 192,370 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed in 2009, along with an additional 62,280 cases of noninvasive breast cancer.¹ Breast cancer remains the most common cancer among women next to skin cancer and an estimated 40,610 women will die from the disease in 2009.¹ Survival rates are high with 89% of patients with private insurance, 77% of uninsured, as well as 75% of Medicaid patients surviving past the 5-year mark.¹

The road to recovery does not end with the completion of chemotherapy or radiation. All survivors face numerous challenges secondary to late effects of treatment including fatigue, anxiety, depression, weight gain, and sleep complications.² There is also the looming threat of recurrence and a second cancer due to radiation treatment.²

The ACS strongly encourages survivors to engage in healthy behaviors and the Institute of Medicine executive summary also states the need for a *Survivorship Care Plan* to include suggestions for preventative practices and how to maintain health and well-being.³ Evidence shows that cancer survivors benefit by increased levels of activity to improve quality of life,⁴ cardio-respiratory fitness, depression, anxiety, fatigue/tiredness, vigor, and vitality.⁵ As more people are surviving cancer treatments and living longer, quality of life (QOL) becomes as important as length of life. Two important contributors to QOL involve both psychological and physiological functions.⁶

With the increase in survival rates for breast cancer, there is a need for continued intervention programs targeting the lifelong and potentially extensive needs of individual survivors. Introducing interventions that target all issues with a multifaceted, comprehensive approach may prove beneficial in the context of an individual's personal and professional life. Substantive research has shown that social support has improved survivorship outcomes with varied approaches including group and individual support.⁷

While social support has proven efficacy, wellness coaching may be another modality that may benefit survivors throughout all phases of survivorship.⁷ The purpose of our study was to explore the impact of wellness coaching to those that received a monthly general support group for BCS.

Wellness Coaching and Group Social Support Intervention

Wellness coaches have become the key players in delivering interventions in the area of health promotion, public health, and disease management, because of their ability to address multiple behaviors, health risks, and self management of their illness.⁸ Using wellness coaches to empower at-risk employees to adopt healthier lifestyles—by way of telephonic, web-based, or other coaching support—has shown improved outcomes and reduced health care costs.⁸ Individualized wellness coaching is a behavioral intervention delivered by a professionally trained wellness coach to help support and motivate people in making lasting healthy lifestyle changes.⁹ The coach's sole purpose is to assist