

Development of a Mindfulness-based Program for Informal Cancer Caregivers in a Clinical Oncology Context

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BACKGROUND: Informal cancer caregivers play a vital role in the delivery of patient care. Caregivers are often tasked with providing medical and nursing care as well as more ancillary care needs. Informal cancer caregivers experience stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and distress. There is a critical need for research-tested interventions to enhance caregivers' abilities to support and care for cancer survivors. This initiative uses an interdisciplinary approach to improve the quality of care offered to cancer caregivers in a clinical setting.

METHODS: Using a Plan-Do-Study-Act approach, we brought together a team of diverse stakeholders, including informal cancer caregivers, physicians, administrators, psychologists, integrative oncology clinicians, and social scientists. The team relied on both peer-reviewed literature and clinical expertise to identify needs of informal cancer caregivers, existing resources available, and fruitful directions for intervention development to fill critical gaps in caregiver support services. A large evidence base documents that mindfulness-based interventions improve emotional, psychological, and physical health outcomes in cancer patients. Building upon this, the 6-week group, participatory course, Awareness and Resilience for Caregivers (ARC), was designed to enhance coping among informal cancer caregivers of cancer survivors. Weekly sessions explore caregivers' experiences through mindfulness practices including meditation, mindful hatha yoga, reflection, and inquiry. We developed a standardized intervention manual as well as supplemental teacher and participant resources. In June 2017, the ARC Intervention was pilot-tested with eight participants recruited at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center. In July 2017 we conducted a process evaluation with qualitative in-depth interviews involving all participants, organizers, and the instructor.

RESULTS: Caregivers perceived the intervention as helpful and engaging. Caregiver participants expressed interest in having longer weekly sessions, and increasing the course to 8 weekly meetings. Caregivers were willing to travel to the cancer center for the intervention, and did not perceive logistical (time, transportation) barriers to participation. However, caregiver participants highlighted the need to pay attention to intervention delivery setting, and suggested identifying a dedicated space that can be purposefully designed to be conducive to mind:body practice.

CONCLUSION: Our pilot experiences document the feasibility of offering a mindfulness-based program for informal cancer caregivers in clinical oncology contexts.