

The Impact of Therapeutic Counseling on Hospitalized Cancer Patients

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Abstract

Cancer is a complex and challenging illness that not only affects the physical well-being of individuals but also takes a toll on their psychological and emotional health. Hospitalized cancer patients, in particular, face unique stressors associated with the illness, treatment protocols, and the uncertainty of their prognosis. Recognizing the importance of addressing the holistic needs of cancer patients, therapeutic counseling has emerged as a valuable intervention in the healthcare setting. This literature review aims to explore existing research on the effects of therapeutic counseling on the well-being of hospitalized cancer patients. This article is a narrative review and the included article was retrieved from electronic data hubs: NCBI liberty only; Google scholar; ResearchGate and PubMed, published in previous 10 years in the English language only and synthesized by thematic analysis method. Literature supporting the positive effects of therapeutic counseling on the psychological well-being and overall quality of life of hospitalized cancer patients. However, further research is needed to explore the optimal timing, frequency, and specific modalities of counseling interventions to maximize their benefits. Understanding the nuances of therapeutic counseling in the context of cancer care is crucial for healthcare professionals to provide comprehensive support for patients facing the complex challenges of cancer and hospitalization.

Keyword: Therapeutic; Counseling; Hospitalized; Cancer and diet; Patients; Counseling impact.

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INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a global health challenge that affects millions of people across the world. It is a group of diseases characterized by the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells, often leading to the formation of tumors. The impact of cancer is profound, affecting individuals, families, and communities. In 2020, there were an estimated 19.3 million new cancer cases and almost 10 million cancer related deaths worldwide, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a part of the WHO.¹

The most common types of cancer globally include lung, breast, colorectal, stomach, and liver cancers. However, the prevalence of specific types can vary by region and population. The burden of cancer is not evenly distributed globally.² High-income countries generally report higher incidence rates, but certain cancers are more prevalent in specific regions. For example, liver cancer is more common in some parts of Asia, while lung cancer rates are higher in parts of Eastern Europe. Lifestyle factors, such as tobacco use, unhealthy diets, lack of physical activity, and exposure to environmental carcinogens, contribute significantly to the global cancer burden. Efforts to reduce the impact of cancer include prevention strategies, early detection through screening programs, and advancements in cancer treatment modalities.³

Therapeutic Counseling: Therapeutic counseling, often referred to as psychotherapy or counseling, is a professional and collaborative process that involves a trained therapist or counselor working with an individual, couple, family, or group to address and explore emotional, psychological, or behavioral challenges. The primary goal of therapeutic counseling is to improve well-being, alleviate distress, and enhance overall mental health.⁴ Key Features of Therapeutic Counseling are:

Client-Centered Approach: Therapeutic counseling is centered around the individual's needs, experiences, and perspectives. The client actively participates in the therapeutic process, and the counselor creates a supportive and non-judgmental environment.⁵

Confidentiality and Trust: Confidentiality is a fundamental principle in therapeutic counseling. Clients can openly discuss their thoughts and feelings in a safe and confidential space, fostering trust between the client and counselor.⁶

Various Therapeutic Modalities: Therapeutic counseling encompasses a wide range of modalities and approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy, humanistic therapy, and others. The choice of modality depends on the individual's needs and the counselor's expertise.⁷

Exploration and Insight: The counselor assists clients in exploring their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Through this exploration, clients gain insights into patterns, coping mechanisms, and underlying issues contributing to their challenges.⁸

Goal-Oriented and Solution Focused: Therapeutic counseling often involves setting goals and working collaboratively toward positive outcomes. In some cases, the focus is on problem-solving and developing practical strategies for managing difficulties.⁶

Crisis Intervention and Support: Therapeutic counseling is valuable during times of crisis or significant life changes. Counselors provide support,

coping strategies, and a space to process emotions during challenging periods.⁷

Emotional Regulation and Coping Skills: Clients learn and practice emotional regulation and coping skills to manage stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges. The acquisition of these skills can contribute to long-term well-being.⁶ Culturally sensitive counseling acknowledges and respects the diversity of clients. Effective counselors are attuned to cultural differences, ensuring that interventions are relevant and respectful of individual backgrounds. Therapeutic counseling encourages self-reflection, helping clients gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their life circumstances. This increased self-awareness can lead to positive personal growth.⁶

Therapeutic counseling involves continuous assessment of progress and adjustments to the therapeutic approach as needed. This ensures that the counseling process remains tailored to the evolving needs of the client.⁸ Therapeutic counseling is utilized for a wide range of concerns, including mental health disorders, relationship issues, grief and loss, stress management, and personal development. It is provided by licensed and trained professionals, such as psychologists, counselors, social workers, or psychiatrists, who adhere to ethical standards and codes of conduct in their practice.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

This article is a narrative review and the included article was retrieved from electronic data hubs: NCBI liberty only; Google scholar; ResearchGate and Pubmed, published in previous 10 years in the English language only. Literature is synthesized thematically by thematic analysis methods.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Globally, cancer stands as a significant contributor to mortality and morbidity, causing approximately 8.8 million deaths in 2015. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 70% of cancer related deaths are observed in low and middle-income countries.¹ While conventional cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy contribute to enhanced survival rates among patients, they are concurrently associated with severe side effects and detrimental impacts on their Quality of Life (QOL). In the realm of cancer patient care, it is imperative not only to reduce mortality rates, prevent cancer recurrence, and address complications experienced by caregivers but also to enhance the overall QOL of cancer patients.⁹

QOL is defined as an individual's perception of their well-being, encompassing various facets of functioning, including psychological, physical, cognitive, and social aspects. Recently, QOL has emerged as a primary endpoint for evaluating the standard of care and management in oncology medicine, demonstrating its significance as a crucial predictor of survival in global studies, including those conducted in Scotland, Malaysia, and China. Consequently, physicians must take into account the QOL of cancer patients before initiating treatment.¹⁰

The provision of chemotherapy counseling to patients before commencing treatment is pivotal and yields a positive impact on the QOL of cancer patients. Counseling equips patients with knowledge about the treatment process, and potential side effects, and aids in alleviating distress associated with chemotherapy. Presently, the role of pharmacists is evolving from traditional drug services to more patient-centric services, including providing information on chemotherapy regimens and potential side effects for cancer patients. A note worthy development in Malaysia occurred in 2021 with the publication of "Managing Patients on Chemotherapy" (MPCH), the first book of its kind in the country, focusing on counseling cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy through pharmacists.¹

Building upon the insights gained from a preliminary study, we have designed a randomized controlled trial to implement and evaluate the efficacy of chemotherapy counseling by pharmacists, based on the principles outlined in the MPCH book, on the QOL of cancer patients. This trial will be conducted in selected public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia.¹¹

Approaches for cancer management

Numerous studies have investigated the role of psycho-oncology interventions in improving the mental health of cancer patients. Therapeutic counseling, as a key component of these interventions, has been shown to mitigate symptoms of anxiety and depression in hospitalized cancer patients.¹²

Several studies have explored the impact of therapeutic counseling on the overall quality of life of cancer patients. Posluns et al. 2020, found that patients who received counseling reported higher levels of life satisfaction and improved relationships with their families and caregivers.¹¹

Integrative care, combining medical treatment with psychosocial support, has gained recognition in cancer care. Therapeutic counseling as part of integrative care has shown promising results in enhancing patients' ability to cope with the challenges of their illness and treatment.¹⁰

Studies utilizing patient reported outcomes consistently highlight the positive impact of therapeutic counseling. Patients often report decreased distress, increased self-efficacy, and a better sense of control over their lives following counseling sessions.¹³

Hospital settings provide a unique opportunity for the implementation of counseling programs tailored to the needs of cancer patients. Demonstrated that a structured counseling program within a hospital significantly improved patients' coping mechanisms and emotional well-being during their hospitalization.¹⁴

Hospital Based Counseling Programs

Patients grappling with medical conditions often experience emotional distress, anxiety, and uncertainty about their health. Recognizing the profound interplay between mental and physical well-being, healthcare providers have increasingly embraced the integration of counseling services within hospital settings. This holistic approach acknowledges that patient recovery is not solely contingent on medical treatments but also on addressing the psychological aspects of illness.¹³

Hospital based counseling programs encompass a range of therapeutic interventions tailored to the unique needs of patients. These may include individual counseling, group therapy, family sessions, and psychoeducational programs. Such programs are designed to offer emotional support, coping strategies, and a safe space for patients to express their concerns and fears.

Benefits of Hospital Based Counseling Programs

Emotional Well-Being: Studies have shown that hospital-based counseling contributes significantly to improving patients' emotional well-being, and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Enhanced Coping Mechanisms: Counseling equips patients with effective coping mechanisms, fostering resilience in the face of medical challenges.

Improved Treatment Adherence: Patients engaged in counseling programs exhibit better adherence to medical

treatments, potentially leading to improved health outcomes.

In response to the growing recognition of mental health's integral role in overall well-being, hospitals are increasingly integrating counseling services into their standard care protocols. This shift reflects a broader understanding that effective healthcare extends beyond the alleviation of physical symptoms to encompass the psychological and emotional aspects of healing.¹⁴

Nutrition related chronic diseases, including cancer, diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, and inflammatory bowel disease, significantly impact overall health and healthcare systems by affecting digestion and food absorption. Given that dietary modifications can influence biomarkers of non-communicable diseases and alleviate symptoms of various clinical conditions, nutritional counseling is acknowledged as a primary approach for managing these health issues.¹⁵ Additionally, it is recommended as a crucial intervention in addressing malnutrition in older adults¹⁶ and has demonstrated efficacy in conditions such as chronic kidney disease and cancer.¹⁷

Nutritional counseling involves a collaborative process where a patient and a member of the medical team analyze nutritional assessments, identify nutritional problems and goals, discuss strategies to meet these goals, and agree on monitoring frequency and future steps. Its focus is on helping patients comprehend the impact of nutrition on health and implementing practical measures to meet nutritional needs, emphasizing behavioral change.¹⁸ However, it may pose a time burden for patients, leading to high drop-out rates, and face-to-face counseling can strain clinic resources in terms of space and facilities. The emergence of e-counseling technology aims to address these challenges and broaden access for patients.^{19,20}

The enhanced emotional and mental wellness, coupled with an additional 48 minutes of nightly sleep, offers proof of the positive impact experienced by patients and their families engaging in counseling services. It is recommended that nurses and various professionals within the multidisciplinary team actively initiate conversations about supportive therapies with individuals affected by cancer at any point in the cancer journey, irrespective of social standing, gender, or the specific type of cancer.²⁰

Nutrition counselors are typically nutritionists or dietitians, although other healthcare professionals, such as nurses, community health workers, or volunteers, play crucial roles in nutritional counseling. While the role of nurses is recognized in nutrition screening, there is limited evidence regarding their impact or effectiveness

in nutrition counseling. Nevertheless, as integral members of the patient care team, nurses are positioned to facilitate positive behavior changes, enhancing the overall effectiveness of nutritional interventions.

The investigation done by Yan et al. (2023), systematically assesses the effects of personalized dietary counseling, tailored to individual calorie and protein requirements, in comparison to standard discharge counseling follow-up. The study aimed to examine the influence of these interventions on nutritional outcomes, the 90-day readmission rate, and the quality of life among patients post-gastric cancer surgery. The result showed a significant positive impact on cancer patient management.²¹

According to Jodkiewicz et al. (2022), a total of 105 assessable patients, 57 were randomized to receive nutritional counseling, and 48 to receive no nutritional counseling and consumption of an ad-lib oral intake. The intervention group was counseled to achieve a daily energy and protein intake according to recommended dietary allowances. Counseling was standardized and performed by a trained dietitian and took place twice monthly for 5 months from the start of chemotherapy.²² The result of the study showed that therapeutic counseling led to an insignificant in the management of cancer.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the global impact of cancer requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving healthcare professionals, researchers, policymakers, and the broader community. By continuing to invest in research, prevention strategies, and accessible and equitable healthcare, the world can make strides in reducing the burden of cancer and improving outcomes for individuals affected by this complex disease. Hospital-based counseling programs play a crucial role in enhancing patient well-being by addressing the psychosocial dimensions of illness. As healthcare continues to evolve towards a patient-centered model, the integration of counseling services within hospitals exemplifies a commitment to comprehensive care that recognizes the interconnectedness of physical and mental health. While the positive impact of hospital-based counseling programs is evident, challenges such as resource allocation, stigma reduction, and the need for specialized training for healthcare professionals remain. Future research should explore innovative models of integrating counseling services seamlessly into the fabric of healthcare delivery.

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