

Journal Watch (Psychosocial)

Expressive Writing in Patients Receiving Palliative Care: A Feasibility Study

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Patients with advanced cancer receiving palliative care often experience severe physical and psychosocial symptoms. However, there are limited resources for psychological and emotional support. Expressive writing has shown decreased anxiety level in young and healthy people suffering from a number of stressors. **OBJECTIVE:** The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of expressive writing in patients receiving palliative care and the most suitable outcomes of expressive writing in this patient population. **DESIGN:** In this pilot study, patients were randomly assigned to either the expressive writing group (EW) or the neutral writing group (NW). Anxiety level before and after the writing session was compared between the two groups. Writing materials were content analyzed using standard qualitative research methods. **RESULTS:** A total of 24 patients (12 in EW and 12 in NW) were enrolled in the study between October 2006 and January 2007. Although the majority of patients (83%-100%) were able to complete all baseline assessments, poor adherence was observed during the follow-ups. Only 8% of patients completed the 2-week study. There was no significant difference in the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) State-Anxiety scores at baseline, before and after each writing session between the EW and NW groups. **DISCUSSION:** Our rapid accrual suggests that palliative care patients are interested in participating in studies such as expressive writing. The high level of adherence to the baseline assessments indicates that these assessments were not particularly difficult for our patients to complete. Future studies may need to include patients with better performance status, better patient education, means of emotional expression (i.e., audio recording, telephone interview) and improved adherence. **CONCLUSION:** We conclude that clinical trials of expressive writing in the palliative care setting are not feasible unless they undergo major modification in methods compared to those previous reported in other patient population. Our findings will hopefully assist researchers considering similar studies.

Comments:

Strengths/uniqueness:

This report describes an interesting initial effort to introduce the concept of expressive writing to enhance psychological and emotional support and possibly decrease anxiety in a palliative care population.

Weakness:

The data presented is somewhat limited. The methodology indicates that the patients referred included out-patients and in-patients; however the manner in which these patients were contacted by a research nurse suggested they were in fact out-patients. It seems surprising that given this cohort, so few were able to complete all the expressive writing sessions.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

The apparent initial interest in the patients who agreed to participate in this study does suggest that expressive writing may be a method to enhance psychosocial support. However the caution that associated coping skill training may be necessary, does suggest that expressive writing could require significant support from health care professionals.