Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for young adults with cancer

A report of benefits and challenges from the perspective of participants

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Cancer diagnosis and treatment frequently involves physical and psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, fatigue, and sleep disturbances. The young adult population with cancer face unique struggles including poignancy in relation to self-concept, identity formation, independence, role development, loss of independence, and time away from school and peers. Mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly being evaluated for individuals with a cancer diagnosis. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) combines Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction with aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy. This paper aims to briefly describe MBCT and its benefits and challenges in the young adult population with cancer.

Method: An analysis of themes was conducted of post-intervention semi-structured interviews that were conducted with a subsample of 14 participants to gain more detailed information regarding their perception.

Findings: Participants reported positive transformations including in how they cope.

Conclusions: Although a small sample size limits its generalizability, this study provides further evidence that MBCT can be successful in treating psychological symptoms in young adults with cancer.

BACKGROUND

In Canada, the number of individuals currently living with cancer is on the rise with an increase in the incidence of cancer in the young adult population.¹ Diagnosis and treatment frequently involve physical and psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, fatigue, and sleep disturbances. Physical and emotional distress often continues following completion of cancer treatments.² Various psychosocial interventions designed to enhance coping with stress and to improve quality of life have been developed. The young adult population faces unique struggles, including poignancy in relation to self-concept, identity formation, independence, role development, loss of independence, and time away from school and peers.¹

Mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly being evaluated for individuals with a cancer diagnosis.³ The most rigorously described mindfulness-based intervention in cancer is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction intervention (MBSR).⁴ This program arose from the Buddhist principle of mindfulness, described as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose,

in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to things as they are.”⁵ MBSR provides a strategy for coping with stress from daily life and/or a variety of medical illnesses. Recent systemic literature reviews of studies that evaluated this program in individuals impacted by cancer concluded that MBSR was associated with improvement of the quality of life and reduction of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fatigue.^{6,7} Another mindfulness-based intervention that has been utilized in cancer is the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).⁸ This intervention combines MBSR with aspects of cognitive therapy. It uses 8 weekly group sessions format and incorporates a psycho-education component, aiming at helping participants develop detached relationships with their thoughts to prevent the escalation of automatic negative thought patterns.

There is currently a gap in the literature as the majority of studies examining MBCT in the cancer population addressed patients over the age of 40, with younger ages being in the exclusion criteria. Recently, the MBCT program, modified for individuals with a cancer diagnosis (MBCT-Ca) has been launched at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre (PM) of the University Health Network (UHN)³ to answer the research question: what are the benefits and challenges of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for young adults with cancer?

METHOD

The study was carried out at PM. It was approved by the UHN research ethics board. Young adult participants, who were referred to the MBCT-Ca at PM by their healthcare team (MBCT-Young Adult), were recruited from a pool of patients who attended the MBCT-Young Adult Groups. Participants were contacted by the research assistant and invited to take part in an interview, and those who provided consent were invited to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview. Post-intervention semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of participants to gain more detailed information regarding their perception of the MBCT. The first author observed 2 MBCT-Young Adult groups and conducted the interviews and the analysis. The semi-structured interview explored participant’s experiences of the intervention and any associated benefits or challenges that they experienced during the intervention and afterward. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were continued until theme saturation, where additional sampling did not lead to more information related to the research question, was achieved. An initial set of themes were coded, and a preliminary coding scheme was developed using NVivo. The codes were then revised to adjust for new information until no new codes emerged. The analysis was then verified by an additional coder.

RESULTS

Fourteen adolescent and young adult participants, both male and female, between the ages of 20 to 40 were interviewed. These participants had a history of breast, blood, brain, and lung cancers, and were interviewed within 6 to 12 weeks of the end of the MBCT intervention. No information was provided regarding treatment outcomes.

The analysis provided insight into the unique young adult-associated benefits and challenges. Many benefits of the MBCT-Young Adult were identified. Each of the participants came from different backgrounds and used the same mindfulness techniques. The themes that arose show many more benefits than challenges. The analysis indicated the following themes with regards to benefits of MBCT-Young Adult: developing in-the-moment tools, finding an emotional center, coping with pain, acknowledging that one's feelings are valid, and community and a sense of belonging. Some of the themes regarding challenges include: staying focused, finding the time to practice, and reminders of past experiences, facing difficulties or unwanted thoughts.

BENEFITS

Developing in-the-moment tools

The first of the themes that were identified by participants as providing brief, in-the-moment tools to use when stressful situations arise. This theme focuses on the awareness of what you are feeling and awareness of self. Developing these in-the-moment tools helped young adults with cancer cope with their anxiety. "... sit there and focus on your breath and try to relax and try to sort of calm yourself down. Be aware of what you're feeling... focus on it from a more neutral perspective, so you aren't being swayed by your emotions."

Finding an emotional center

Finding an emotional center was a theme mentioned in multiple interviews as a benefit. Young adult participants described developing the ability to be grounded and centered. They spoke of how these skills helped in dealing with stressful situations arising out of their control and not typically faced at a young age. "Can the world please stop spinning for a little bit, so I can get my bearings, that kind of thing. It kind of brought me into a center that I didn't expect to find so quickly, an emotional center, but also a grounding sense of being in time and space."

Coping with pain

Accepting the pain and coping with it was another theme that arose as a benefit to young adult participants. Recognizing the importance of looking out for aches and pains that last long periods of time are a part of being in remission. The worry that every pain may be a cancer relapse causes distress for many patients. Participants acknowledged the benefit of breathing spaces, which is an opportunity to pause, and relax, and decide what to do next, helped participants decide what to do with regards to pain management and the mental anguish associated with it. "Every little bump and scrape and bruise and pain, I think I'm getting cancer again... you need to develop any kind of tool, any kind of

skill that helps you really channel into what you're feeling inside your body and what you're thinking inside your mind, and how to interact with it or not." "I'll do the body scan, [and say to myself] you're not actually in pain, you're fine. Those quick things to break the record in my head has been really helpful."

Acknowledging that one's feelings are valid

An important theme that arose was acknowledging one's feelings. The feelings that one has as a young adult cancer patient are unique; these participants developed the ability to acknowledge their feelings and accept them nonjudgmentally. Recognizing that they can sit with these feelings, and accepting them was an obstacle that many participants overcame in their journey of self-acceptance. "I kind of felt bad for feeling bad and I didn't understand why and I resented myself for that. I kind of felt like a privileged brat who didn't appreciate the silver lining of it all. What I learned from the program very shortly after I started it was that was okay. It was okay to feel that way and it doesn't necessarily mean that you'll feel that way forever, so here's what you can do about it now."

Community and sense of belonging

As a young adult, learning mindfulness in the group context created an immediate community, and provided participants with a sense of belonging, which they valued. "You know, I wanted to be in a community, so I thought, you know like everyone's going to mindfulness class. We have the same goals and if they're all from the community of the hospital, you know, I will have found a like-minded community."

CHALLENGES

While the young adult participants said that there were no major challenges, some of the minor ones include the following:

Staying focused

A challenge that arose for many participants was staying focused and concentrating throughout the body scans, as their minds would wander throughout the practice. "The body scans. I had a really hard time sitting still...I had a really, really hard time sitting still and focusing on those."

Finding the time to practice

Another theme described involved the challenge of being able to find the time to practice mindfulness throughout the week. The importance of dedicating time to practice was acknowledged, but it was difficult to make time for it. "I mean, really, I think the biggest challenge is the commitment and, practicing, actually doing the work and doing it every day."

Reminders of past experiences, facing difficulties, or unwanted thoughts

The final challenge recognized by the participants was seeing other participants at different stages of illness or having to think about the area where cancer originated from during a body scan. "I guess it's with some of the meditations and some of the body scans. It just pulled me towards my past, like, through my breast to my past."

CONCLUSION

Young adult patients with cancer are a unique group with different needs. Participants reported positive transformations, including in how they cope on a day to day basis, improvement of relationships as a result of learning how to respond instead of reacting, and how accepting their feelings and emotions improved their well-being. The importance of having a specific MBCT group for the young adult population was illuminated in this preliminary study. Adaptations to the program have been made to address the needs and challenges encountered.

*“IT’S PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST
IMPORTANT THINGS I’VE DONE.... I
CAN SEE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN MY
PERSONALITY AND HOW I ATTACK
THINGS THAT ARE STRESSFUL.”*

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