

A written emotional expression intervention for women who have completed treatment for breast cancer: effects on perceived emotional support

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Background: Many patients with breast cancer report increased anxiety and uncertainty following treatment. One possible intervention at this stage is Expressive Writing (EW). EW is the process of writing about stressful and traumatic events and has been associated with positive outcomes in a number of clinical populations.

Methods: Women with early stage breast cancer were recruited during their final week of treatment (n=104). Those randomly assigned to the writing group wrote for 20 minutes on four consecutive days about their experience of having breast cancer. Participants in the control group received normal care. Quality of life (QOL), mood, social support and healthcare utilisation were assessed at baseline, 1, 3 and 6 months. Interviews explored the perceived impact of writing.

Results: There was a significant effect of group on women's perceptions of social support with those in the intervention group being more satisfied with emotional support received ($p<0.05$). Satisfaction with emotional support was associated with social and family well-being ($p<0.01$) and inversely correlated with negative mood ($p<0.01$) six months post intervention. Mood and QOL improved over time in both groups. Healthcare utilisation did not differ between groups. Most participants found writing valuable and reported no long term negative effects.

Conclusion: The results indicate that writing about breast cancer has positive effects on women's satisfaction with emotional support. It would be premature to suggest that EW could replace existing support systems but these preliminary findings suggest that it could be incorporated into the routine care of breast cancer patients with beneficial effects.