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Original Article

Emotion Focused Therapy Enduringly Reduces Depression and Increases Self-Compassion in Women with Breast Cancer: A Semi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) is designed to help patients identify and process their emotions. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of emotion-focused therapy on improving depression and self-compassion in women with breast cancer.

Method: This was a quasi-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design with a control group and a 3-month follow-up. The sample consisted of 30 women with breast cancer in Tehran who had a depression score of >17 at screening and were selected via purposive sampling and randomly placed in experimental and control groups of 15. The experimental group underwent EFT over twelve 50-minute individual sessions according to the Greenberg emotion-focused therapy protocol. Research data were collected using the Beck Depression Inventory and the Self-compassion Scale before, after, and 3 months after the end of treatment. Data analysis was performed using repeated-measures two-way ANOVA.

Results: The experimental group scored significantly higher in self-compassion and lower in depression in the posttest compared with the pretest. In the follow-up assessment, depression scores were as low as the posttest levels, but self-compassion scores decreased relative to the posttest; however, they remained significantly above the pre-test levels. In the control group, both depression and self-compassion scores were stable over time.

Conclusion: EFT can be used as an appropriate intervention to reduce depression and increase self-compassion significantly and enduringly in women with breast cancer.

Keywords: Emotion-Focused Therapy, Depression, Self-Compassion, Breast Cancer

Introduction

Anxiety and depression are among the most common forms of psychological distress in most cancer patients (1). Breast cancer can challenge patients' core beliefs about invulnerability, safety, and self-worth and can lead to depression, uncertainty, body image concerns, and somatic symptom issues (2). Self-compassion is another variable that is related to mental health and subsequently to physical health. It contributes to enhanced emotional resilience and reduced depression and anxiety in patients (3). Research findings demonstrate that the sub-threshold rules in the Iranian culture can result in anger and sadness following patterns of suppressed emotional expression, increasing the experience of negative emotion for the individual and negatively affecting their overall mental health and psychological well-being (4). Therefore, researchers and psychologists emphasize the importance of therapies that can help regulate and express emotions. Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) has been developed and expanded as a treatment protocol for processing and regulating emotion and its application is considered in improving social health indicators. The present study aims to investigate the effect of EFT on depression and self-compassion in women with breast cancer.

Methods

The study was conducted with a semi-experimental pretest-posttest design and involved a control group and a 12-week follow-up. The population of the study consisted of women with breast cancer who had visited a general surgeon and oncologist at Rasoul Akram Hospital and Khatam-ul-Anbia Cancer Clinic in Tehran during 2020–2021. Thirty people were selected using purposive sampling method and randomly assigned to two groups of 15 people (experimental and control group). All the participants completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), 2nd edition, Self-compassion Scale (SCS) (Neff, 2003) at three stages. The experimental group received 12 weekly sessions of individual emotion-focused therapy, with each session

lasting for 50 minutes (5, 6). Data were analyzed using the two-factor analysis of variance with repeated measures of one factor and the Bonferroni post hoc test.

Results

The mean (SD) ages of the experimental group and the control group were 45.60 (SD = 8.11) and 43.40 (SD = 6.94), respectively. An independent *t* test showed that there was no significant difference between the groups in terms of age ($P < 0.05$). Participants were also homogeneous in terms of education level, family history of cancer, number of breast surgeries, disease stage, and neoadjuvant chemotherapy (P 's < 0.05). Mixed analysis of variance was also carried out (Table 1). Post hoc analyses with the Bonferroni correction showed that EFT significantly reduced depression symptoms and increased self-compassion.

Discussion

Expression, processing, and regulation of emotions can help reduce the cognitive-emotional symptoms of depression in breast cancer patients, reduce negative attitudes through self-compassion and protective anger, and improve the associated somatic symptoms. Staying in contact with emotional experience, conscious exploration of it, reflection, and understanding the meaning of the emotional experience are alternative mechanisms for reducing the subjects' depression. Transforming maladaptive schemas and rewriting them through creating new patterns of emotional processing helps clients not to reengage in painful primary maladaptive emotions and to avoid such experiences, something that seems to explain the consistency of treatment outcomes. On the other hand, acceptance of pain, instead of avoiding it, can help to explain the effectiveness of emotional therapy in increasing compassion.

Table 1- Descriptive Indicators and Results of Mixed aAnalysis of Variance of Depression and Self-Compassion

Variable	Group	Control	Experimental	Intragroup Comparison (Time)	Time*Group	Intergroup Comparison
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)			
Depression	Pre-test	23.87 (8.44)	25.33 (7.20)	F =45.817 df=2 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.621$	F=40.860 df=2 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.593$	F=15.592 df=1 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.358$
	Post-test	21.60 (8.24)	8.40 (5.99)			
	Follow up	25.07 (6.82)	8.20 (7.61)			
Self-Compassion	Pre-test	93.68 (10.80)	71.47 (13.56)	F=39.224 df=2 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.583$	F=28.439 df=2 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.504$	F= 13.413 df=1 P=0.001 $\eta^2=0.529$
	Post-test	67.20 (10.56)	103.53 (9.63)			
	Follow up	66.20 (10.90)	94.53 (15.12)			

The limited number of treatment sessions for this group of participants seems to have prevented the consolidation of the effects of the treatment on self-compassion from taking place.

Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that EFT can significantly reduce depression and increase self-compassion in patients with breast cancer. Therefore, the results can help researchers, therapists, and health professionals in designing appropriate interventions for these patients.

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