

## EFFECTIVENESS OF ELECTRONIC SUPPORT GROUPS FOR WOMEN WITH BREAST CANCER

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We studied the effectiveness and processes of real-time, online support groups (chat rooms) for women with breast cancer. The Wellness Community's (TWC) trained facilitators led the groups. TWC is a free, community-based, psychosocial support program for people with cancer and their families providing services from 20 national facilities. Currently, TWC serves over 5000 cancer patients in weekly, professionally led support groups. In this study, 58 women were recruited. Service was provided to 40 women with primary and metastatic breast cancer in 5 secure chat rooms, each lasting 16 weeks. 2/3 of the women were from small towns or rural areas. (8 women terminated prior to the completion of the groups, half because they found it unsuitable and the other half because of technical online problems). Effectiveness was assessed by a pre-post telephone interview, pre-post questionnaires assessing depression, social supports, coping styles, self-esteem, level of pain, and measures of their interaction in the group using Pennebaker's linguistic dictionary (LIWC).

### Results:

1. Based on interviews and social support information, 80% (chi square  $p < .05$ ) found the experience highly rewarding and saw the people in the group as a relevant new support system that they plan on keeping up after the end of the group experience. In a word, real relationships were formed.
2. Analysis of the group interaction showed that participants changed over time; they showed significantly lower anxiety (linear regression  $p < .05$ ), increased feelings of cohesiveness (linear regression  $p < .05$ ) and greater expressions of positive feelings (linear regression  $p < .05$ ).
3. Analysis of the questionnaire data showed significant changes in depression scores (paired t-test  $p < .05$ ) and social support (paired t-test  $p < .05$ ).

### Implications:

This pilot study demonstrates that real time chat rooms conducted by professionally trained facilitators can mirror the general properties of face-to-face groups and provide a meaningful group experience to women with breast cancer. A number of questions will form the investigators' future research, random trials comparing face to face groups to those on the internet, development of a framework for understanding who is more likely to benefit from which setting.

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