

Depression and Heart Failure: Can Support Groups Reduce Depressive Symptoms?

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Heart failure (HF) is a chronic and progressive condition with symptoms and a prognosis that can be overwhelming to those afflicted. Depression is prevalent in patients with heart failure and co-morbid depression can potentially lead to many adverse outcomes including increased mortality. Psychological distress is common in patients with chronic illness including heart failure, and can impair their quality of life and their ability to function. As a co-morbid condition, depression is linked to significant increases in disability, morbidity, and mortality.

The prevalence of depression in HF varies depending on the population of patients enrolled in studies, ranging from 16 to 22%. Management of depression may include pharmacological and alternative treatments. However, relapse is high when these treatments are discontinued. Psychosocial approaches such as participating in support groups, have shown to help patients with chronic and life threatening diseases cope better with their health situations. It has been postulated that peer support directly influences health outcomes by: (a) decreasing isolation and feelings of loneliness; (b) swaying health practices and deterring maladaptive behaviours or responses; (c) promoting positive psychological states and individual motivation; (d) providing information regarding access to medical services or the benefits of behaviours that positively influence health and well-being; and (e) preventing the risk for, progression of, and recovery from illness. Support groups may have beneficial effects in having members providing psychological support to each other. Through engaging with others in similar situations, members may improve their feelings of well-being, and possibly reduce depressive symptoms. However, there is paucity in the literature in regards to the use of support groups in patients with HF and depression. The studies of peer-support groups in other chronic disease such as in cancer have shown remarkable success in improving clinical outcomes and psychological states.

The literature reviewed in regards to support groups in other chronic diseases provides preliminary evidence of the opportunities peer support groups could offer to heart failure patients with depressive symptoms. The support group's ability to access information, support, and camaraderie bestows many benefits to patients with depressive symptoms. The positive outcomes may suggest that support groups can be utilized as an adjunct to help reduce HF patients' depressive symptom. However, empirical evidence is essential to validate the efficacy of such programs.

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