

Mindfulness in Motion for the Resilient Cancer Survivor and Their Caregiver: Creating Community in a Socially Distanced World

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DESCRIPTION

Mindfulness in Motion (MIM) for Resilient Cancer Survivorship is a program designed to improve the quality of life of both survivors and caregivers. Reality, for both the survivor and caregiver, has been transformed by a cancer diagnosis and mindfulness can help in coping with this change.

Cancer touches every aspect of health; patients can expect disruptions in sleep, an increased level of basal pain, and immense fatigue [1]. These common physical side effects spark a cascade of social and emotional consequences that can create a disconnection between the survivor and their new reality. Emotionally, increased rates of anxiety and depression have been observed in cancer survivors, however, the most profound change occurs in the loss of identity and an altered vision of themselves [2].

Cancer disrupts the routine of life, eliminating activities and habits that help make up one's identity. From having to take a leave of absence from a life-long career, to not being as engaged with grandchildren because of fatigue, cancer can isolate patients from things that give them meaning/purpose.

MIM for Resilient Cancer Survivorship aims to address the collateral damage of a cancer diagnosis through survivors/caregivers participation in 8-weeks of mindfulness training [3]. The program meets weekly for an hour to learn the science supporting the benefits of mindfulness and yoga, includes class discussion of cancer-pertinent topics, ending with a practice that combines mindfulness, music, and gentle movement. Each weekly theme corresponds with areas cancer impacts (sleep, identity, etc.). Participants report that the course offered relief from anxiety while changing the way they view their illness. When asked how the program affected her, one participant stated, "I still believe cancer can be devastating. But I don't view it as much of a death sentence, as I did previously...I remain grateful for my survival." Alongside these benefits, participants also reported that a community feeling and a shared experience was critical, stating, "It has been really good to spend time with other cancer survivors, and to practice something positive and good."

Then in March of 2020 the world shut down. The onset of fear, masks, and zoom would overwhelm the entire world. Newsreels bombarded the public with frightening numbers and a myriad of symptoms that ranged from severe chest pains to a runny nose. The COVID-19 pandemic was born.

Being diagnosed with cancer is a stressful situation in itself, now, with a pandemic and being "high-risk," cancer survivors face the inherent anxiety that comes with having cancer along with the many fears of being immune compromised during a pandemic. MIM for Resilient Cancer Survivorship was needed more than ever, however, nothing could be in-person to maintain the health of the participants, thus MIM moved to synchronistic zoom delivery.

The 8-week program was adapted for complete virtual delivery and the first offering of the virtually adapted program proved feasible and acceptable. Researchers were surprised that attendance was better in the virtual sessions when compared to pre-COVID times. Data showed that the virtual format lowered the burden of attending weekly sessions in person, which is often a barrier for cancer survivors because of their daily pain and frequent doctor appointments.

Furthermore, the survivors reported that they appreciated the sense of community that MIM allowed them to have without exposing themselves to COVID. Cancer doesn't stop just because a pandemic has hit the world, it doesn't care that the hospitals are overrun with sick people and stressed health care providers (HCPs), or that survivors need treatment in those hospitals by those HCPs. It is immune. Engaging in mindful conversations with people experiencing this same reality diminished the feelings of isolation and solitary struggle. Normalizing their fear and allowing participants to process these feelings was critical in such an uncertain time. MIM created a community in a socially distant world. MIM achieved in 100% virtual delivery what the senior author had initially intended her MIM program to do- create and nourish community in a population that has the capacity to offer one another support.

That is what MIM is all about; acknowledging that stress and adversity are inevitable, and, that mindfulness (offered in a

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supportive community) provides the tools to manage how we respond. Our team adapted an in-person program to all virtual delivery when we needed to support our participants through this unprecedented time. Our participants responded to the changes with resilience and willingness to accept mindfulness training regardless of the delivery medium. This was mindfulness in action.

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