Randomized Controlled Trial of Expressive Writing for Patients with Renal Cell Carcinoma


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PURPOSE: This randomized controlled trial examined the quality-of-life benefits of an expressive writing (EW) intervention for patients with renal cell carcinoma (RCC) and identified a potential underlying mechanism of intervention efficacy.

PATIENTS AND METHODS: Patients (N = 277) with stage I to IV RCC were randomly assigned to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings regarding their cancer (EW) or about neutral topics (neutral writing [NW]) on four separate occasions. Patients completed the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), MD Anderson Symptom Inventory (MDASI), Brief Fatigue Inventory (BFI), Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), Medical Outcomes Study Short Form-36 (SF-36), and Impact of Event Scale (IES) at baseline and 1, 4, and 10 months after the intervention.

RESULTS: The mean age of participants (28% stage IV; 41% female) was 58 years. Multilevel modeling analyses, using a Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = .021$ for six outcomes adjusted for the correlation among outcomes, revealed that, relative to the NW group, patients in the EW group reported significantly lower MDASI scores ($P = .003$) and higher physical component summary scores on the SF-36 ($P = .019$) at 10 months after the intervention. Mediation analyses revealed that significant group differences for MDASI scores at 10 months were mediated by lower IES scores at 1 month after the intervention in the EW group ($P = .042$). No significant group differences were observed in the BFI, CES-D, PSQI, and mental component summary of the SF-36.

CONCLUSION: EW may reduce cancer-related symptoms and improve physical functioning in patients with RCC. Evidence suggests that this effect may occur through short-term improvements in cognitive processing.