

An appraisal of the evidence on the efficacy of bibliotherapy on anxiety, distress, and coping in patients with cancer is lacking in the literature. Bibliotherapy is a self-help intervention using a variety of tools, such as self-help workbooks, pamphlets, novels, and audiobooks, to improve mental health. This review identified nine original research articles that examined bibliotherapy as an intervention to alleviate the psychological issues associated with a cancer diagnosis. Data synthesis from these studies provides preliminary evidence that bibliotherapy is an acceptable and beneficial adjunct therapy for patients with cancer experiencing anxiety, depression, and ineffective coping.

AT A GLANCE

- Preliminary evidence shows that patients with cancer can benefit from bibliotherapy.
- Stress reduction, relief of anxiety and depression, and effective coping are among the most frequently patient-reported outcomes of bibliotherapy.
- Consistent use of the same instruments to measure patient-reported outcomes and randomized, controlled trials are warranted to draw solid conclusions and establish the causal link between bibliotherapy and patient-reported outcomes.

KEYWORDS

bibliotherapy; anxiety; cancer; coping; quality of life; breast cancer

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Bibliotherapy

Appraisal of evidence for patients diagnosed with cancer

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A 36-year-old yoga trainer, E.A., was referred to a breast cancer specialist in a large academic medical center in the Midwestern United States for further evaluation and consultation on treatment options for her newly diagnosed right breast cancer. Two weeks earlier, E.A. had a routine mammogram that showed a new right breast mass. Diagnostic mammogram and ultrasound of the right breast confirmed this mass with no suspicious lymphadenopathy. E.A.'s right breast mass biopsy demonstrated grade 3 infiltrating ductal carcinoma, which was weakly estrogen receptor-positive (1%–10%), progesterone receptor-negative, and HER2- by immunohistochemistry and fluorescent in situ hybridization techniques. The Ki-67 index of the cancer cells was 90%. A genomic test revealed a high-risk breast cancer subtype. Magnetic resonance imaging of the right breast showed a 3.5 cm x 3.2 cm x 2.1 cm mass in the right breast with no lymph node enlargement and no cortical thickening. Positron-emission tomography showed no metastatic disease. E.A. appeared very anxious while waiting for the breast cancer specialist. The oncology nurse provided E.A. with a novel to read to alleviate her anxiety via bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy refers to the use of any literature that supports good mental health and is a versatile and cost-effective intervention often used to supplement other types of therapy (GoodTherapy, 2016). The National Library of Medicine (2018) defines bibliotherapy as a form of psychotherapy in which the patient is given carefully selected material to read. Bibliotherapy is often used to treat common mental health problems, such as stress, depression, anxiety, and psychological disorders (Gots, 2016). In the hematology/oncology practice setting, patients may have feelings of anxiety and distress while being screened for cancer, waiting on results of tests, receiving a cancer diagnosis, being treated for cancer, or worrying that the cancer will come back. Despite the history of therapeutic benefits of bibliotherapy in numerous non-cancer-related health issues, such as sexual dysfunction (van Lankveld, 1998), anxiety disorders in children and adolescents (Amer, 1999; James, Soler, & Weatherall, 2005), and depression in older adults (Wilson, Mottram, & Vassilas, 2008), the efficacy of bibliotherapy in alleviating psychosocial health problems in patients diagnosed with cancer has not been previously examined in a systematic manner.

Overview

Patients diagnosed with cancer often experience anxiety and distress that can affect their overall quality of life (National Cancer Institute, 2015). Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach primarily used in a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety and distress, in which written materials play a central role (Glasgow & Rosen, 1978).

Objectives

The purposes of this review are to appraise the evidence on the efficacy of bibliotherapy for alleviating anxiety, depression, and other psychosocial outcome variables in patients diagnosed with cancer and to describe the patient-reported psychosocial outcomes and their measures in research studies involving bibliotherapy.