

Exploring Peer Support Characteristics for Promoting Physical Activity Among Women Living Beyond a Cancer Diagnosis: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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PURPOSE: To explore women's perceptions of and preferred peer characteristics for peer mentoring to support physical activity promotion. Understanding how women living beyond a cancer diagnosis perceive peers for physical activity may help guide further health behavior mentoring and support practices.

PARTICIPANTS & SETTING: 16 English-speaking adult women living beyond a cancer diagnosis.

METHODOLOGIC APPROACH: Following a qualitative descriptive approach, four in-person focus groups were conducted and discussions were analyzed using inductive content analysis.

FINDINGS: Participants described four considerations for peer matching: (a) personal characteristics, (b) physical activity characteristics, (c) cancer characteristics, and (d) finding a peer. Similarities in age, life phase, location, history of physical activity, type of cancer, severity of cancer, and personality were integral. An online or mobile application and the ability to create multiple partnerships were preferred.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING: Understanding methods to promote physical activity is imperative for long-term survivorship outcomes. Nurses in oncology care settings may promote physical activity and social support for women living beyond cancer diagnoses by facilitating optimal peer matches.

KEYWORDS exercise; social support; qualitative; peers; cancer; women

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Almost one in every two women in North America will be diagnosed with cancer in her lifetime, with 63%–88% surviving more than five years following a diagnosis. Although survival rates are promising, there are many acute and lasting effects of cancer diagnosis and treatment that negatively affect quality of life (Götze et al., 2018). Efforts are needed to improve the survivorship experience, and physical activity is a well-tested behavioral strategy to enhance health and well-being for people living with and beyond a cancer diagnosis. Physical activity has been found to increase muscular strength and aerobic fitness; improve quality of life and body image; and reduce fatigue, anxiety, depression, cancer recurrence, cancer-related mortality, and all-cause mortality (Lugo et al., 2019; McTiernan et al., 2019; Rezende et al., 2018). Despite its well-documented benefits, many women decrease their physical activity after a cancer diagnosis (Sabiston et al., 2014) and do not engage in enough physical activity to realize its potential benefits for health and well-being (Campbell et al., 2019). Given the long-standing and consistent evidence that physical activity is safe, feasible, and beneficial (Campbell et al., 2019), it is critical to help women living beyond a cancer diagnosis to be more physically active.

Leading clinicians and researchers in physical activity and oncology care highlight the need to increase the availability, accessibility, and uptake of physical activity among individuals living beyond a cancer diagnosis (Adams et al., 2021; Basen-Engquist et al., 2017; Kennedy et al., 2021; Mina et al., 2018). A potential source for increasing physical activity, in particular among women, is the development of social support opportunities (McDonough et al., 2019, 2021).