Self-Compassion in the Context of Cancer: A Qualitative Exploration of a Brief Group Intervention

People with cancer often face significant psychological challenges and distress, and improved psychosocial supports for people with cancer are needed. Self-compassion, a way of self-relating that entails adopting a warm and caring response to personal suffering (Neff, 2003b), is a promising construct in the context of cancer. However, little is known about the relevance and acceptability of self-compassion for people with cancer.

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to develop an understanding of the perspectives of adults with cancer regarding the relevance and acceptability of self-compassion and a workshop introducing mindfulness and self-compassion practices. Eighteen participants—11 females and 7 males—with a lived experience of early stage cancer took part in one of three self-compassion workshops and focus group discussions. Participants’ primary cancer diagnoses included breast cancer, prostate cancer, head and neck cancer, lung cancer, and lymphoma. The focus group discussions were transcribed and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to produce three main themes, and ten sub-themes.

The main themes were (a) self-compassion is not a typical response when ‘dealing’ with cancer, (b) self-compassion is valuable for facing the challenges of cancer, and (c) reconciling self-compassion with existing worldview. Self-compassion was perceived to be relevant and potentially helpful to people with cancer across the illness trajectory and in life beyond cancer, and was valued as an alternative to uncompassionate ways of self-relating. Self-compassion was evaluated in light of existing socially and culturally informed values and beliefs that emphasised an orientation towards others rather than focusing on oneself. Yet participants reconciled these potentially conflicting ideas such that self-compassion interventions were perceived to be acceptable and valuable. These findings provide new insights into the relevance of self-compassion for the lived experience of people with cancer and acceptability of self-compassion interventions in the context of cancer, and can inform future developments of such interventions to enhance psychosocial wellbeing.

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