An Online Psychological Intervention for Partners of Cancer Patients: Interest, Influencing Factors and Preferences

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Background

Partners of cancer patients may suffer from diminished emotional, social, physical and relational functioning. However, the availability of evidence-based and easily accessible supportive interventions for partners of cancer patients is limited. Moreover, participation in existing interventions is low. Aim of the present study was (1) to examine partners' interest in an online psychological intervention and variables associated with it, and (2) to discover which preconditions an intervention should meet and which elements it should contain.

Method

A questionnaire was spread via various channels, and was filled in by 139 partners of cancer patients. Questions included: socio-demographics, disease-related characteristics (stage and duration of cancer), partners' health (physical and mental health, resilience) and the psychological impact of their role as caregiver (caregiver strain, communication, posttraumatic growth). Additionally, we asked partners about their intention to use an online psychological intervention, which preconditions (maximum time, participate alone or with patient) the intervention should meet, and which elements (information, peer support, psychological guidance) it should contain.

Results

Of all respondents, 60 partners were not, 49 maybe and 14 definitively interested in an online intervention. Partners who intended to participate were significantly younger, more often employed and perceived more posttraumatic growth. None of the other variables, including disease related factors, were significantly associated with the intention to participate. Most respondents felt the intervention should take less than 1 hour a week, and should contain information and peer support. Respondents differed in their preferences about the maximum duration, the need for having regular (e-mail) contact with a psychologist, and about the need to address both partners (vs. partner-only).

Conclusions

There is interest in an online intervention for partners of cancer patients. Younger and employed partners are more likely to use such an intervention. Remarkably, the intention to use the intervention is neither associated with stage and severity of the illness of the patient, nor with psychological distress of the partner. This suggests that there is a difference between an objective and subjective need for support.

Research Implications

Based on the results of this study we are developing an online intervention for partners of cancer patients. Partners' needs and preferences will be addressed and partners are actively involved in the development of the content and the design of the intervention. Effectiveness of the intervention will be investigated in a randomized controlled trial, which will start by the end of 2013.
Clinical Implications

In case the newly developed online intervention will be effective, this intervention will be implemented in regular care.

Acknowledgement of Funding

This research was supported by a grant from the Dutch Cancer Society (KWF)/Alpe d’HuZes with the grant number 5248.