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A Feasibility Study on a Men's Cancer Support Group at the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato Andreas Cancer Center

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Significance

The Institute of Medicine published a report in 2007 which outlined numerous sources of psychosocial distress that, ideally, should be managed when working with patients with cancer. Typically, they involve a lack of information available to the patient, emotional problems such as depression or anxiety, a lack of transportation and other resources, and disruptions to their daily life. Combined, these factors all contribute to poor adherence to prescribed treatments, and a slower return to health. Attending social support groups is a popular approach to coping with health problems such as these in the United States, and is considered to be clinically effective. Despite the buffering effects played by social support groups, however, men are found to be less likely than women to participate in support groups. The most commonly reported barrier to utilization of support groups is a lack of awareness of or lack of availability of these services. The goal of this project was to determine if there is a need for a men's cancer support group at the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato Andreas Cancer Center through the use of a survey of men with a cancer diagnosis.

Literature Review

- Support groups are based on the belief that when individuals meet and share common experiences, an important therapeutic process emerges from that experience. For those affected by physical disease, support groups can reduce their sense of isolation, and expose them to others who have experienced a similar condition. They also provide social support and share information about their condition, treatments, treatment side effects, and an understanding and acceptance among group members. With regards to cancer, there is evidence that social supports mitigate neuroendocrine and immune response to stress, improve immune function, and buffer the progression of cancer. In a study from the 2012 National Health Interview Survey, survivors who report utilizing psychosocial care are more likely to be "very satisfied" with how their needs were met. A variety of studies have also found improvements in mood, coping, pain symptoms, fatigue, and distress. Other studies have also found that support group participants have longer survival rates than those who do not participate in support groups.
- The most commonly reported barrier to utilization of support groups is a lack of awareness of these services or a lack of availability of these services. In addition, the far distances that patients must usually drive to receive care for their cancer diagnosis has an impact on the socioeconomic status and has been found to take a toll on family and friends who act as caregivers. However, due to their rural locations, many patients find it difficult to obtain transportation to and from support groups, even if they exhibit an interest in one.
- There is evidence that rural cancer patients have higher levels of psychosocial needs than their urban counterparts. Studies have found that upwards of 50% of rural cancer patients are at-risk for depression, and 34% have some type of psychosocial problem which requires assistance.
- The composition of support groups for individuals affected by cancer has been shown to be important. Research has shown that men are more reluctant than women to seek social support and usually feel too embarrassed to talk about issues specific to their gender. Much of this is related to issues of masculinity, economic concerns, changes to their body and their body image, and their changing role with family, friends, and colleagues. The dominant form of masculinity in contemporary western society emphasizes being tough, stoic, emotionally insensitive, self-sufficient, powerful, and successful. Researchers have therefore recommended developing flexible, gender sensitive options for group support and activities for men with cancer.

Methodology

The researchers received approval to conduct this study from the Southwest Minnesota Region Research Oversight Committee for the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato on 3/5/14, and the MSU, Mankato IRB on 4/4/14. Data collection occurred from 4/8/14 to 6/5/14. Data were collected via a needs assessment survey derived from the Patient Needs Assessment Tool (PNAT) for oncology clinicians. The survey included demographic information and ten questions related to the patient's support networks, knowledge of existing cancer support groups, previous attendance at a cancer support group, interest in a men's cancer support group, and reasons the patient would and would not utilize a men's cancer support group. When a patient was checked in at the Andreas Cancer Center, their assigned nurse asked if they would be willing to speak with the researcher regarding the study. The researcher then met with the patients who agreed to participate, explained the research study, and provided the patient with a copy of the consent form and a manila envelope with the Mayo Clinic Health System Men's Cancer Support Group Survey. Patients were left to complete the survey and gave the finished product to their assigned nurse.

Variable	Number Interested	Number Not Interested
Cancer diagnosis		
Lung	2 (13%)	6 (33%)
Prostate	1 (7%)	3 (17%)
Colon	4 (27%)	0 (0%)
Other	8 (53%)	7 (39%)
Blank/Did Not Answer	0 (0%)	2 (22%)
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)
Marital status		
Single	2 (13%)	0 (0%)
Married	12 (80%)	13
Divorced	1 (7%)	2 (22%)
Widowed	0 (0%)	2 (22%)
Member of an Unmarried Couple	0 (0%)	1
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)
Age group		
31-40	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
41-50	1 (7%)	1 (6%)
51-60	3 (20%)	5 (28%)
61-70	5 (33%)	6 (33%)
71-80	2 (13%)	4 (22%)
81-90	4 (27%)	1 (6%)
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)
Geographical area		
Greater Mankato area	9 (60%)	9 (50%)
Outside Greater Mankato area	6 (40%)	9 (50%)
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)
Form of cancer treatment		
Radiation therapy	4 (27%)	7 (39%)
Chemotherapy	5 (33%)	4 (22%)
Both radiation therapy and chemotherapy	6 (40%)	7 (39%)
Total	15 (100%)	18 (100%)

Figure 1. Reasons Men With Cancer Would Not Utilize a Support Group

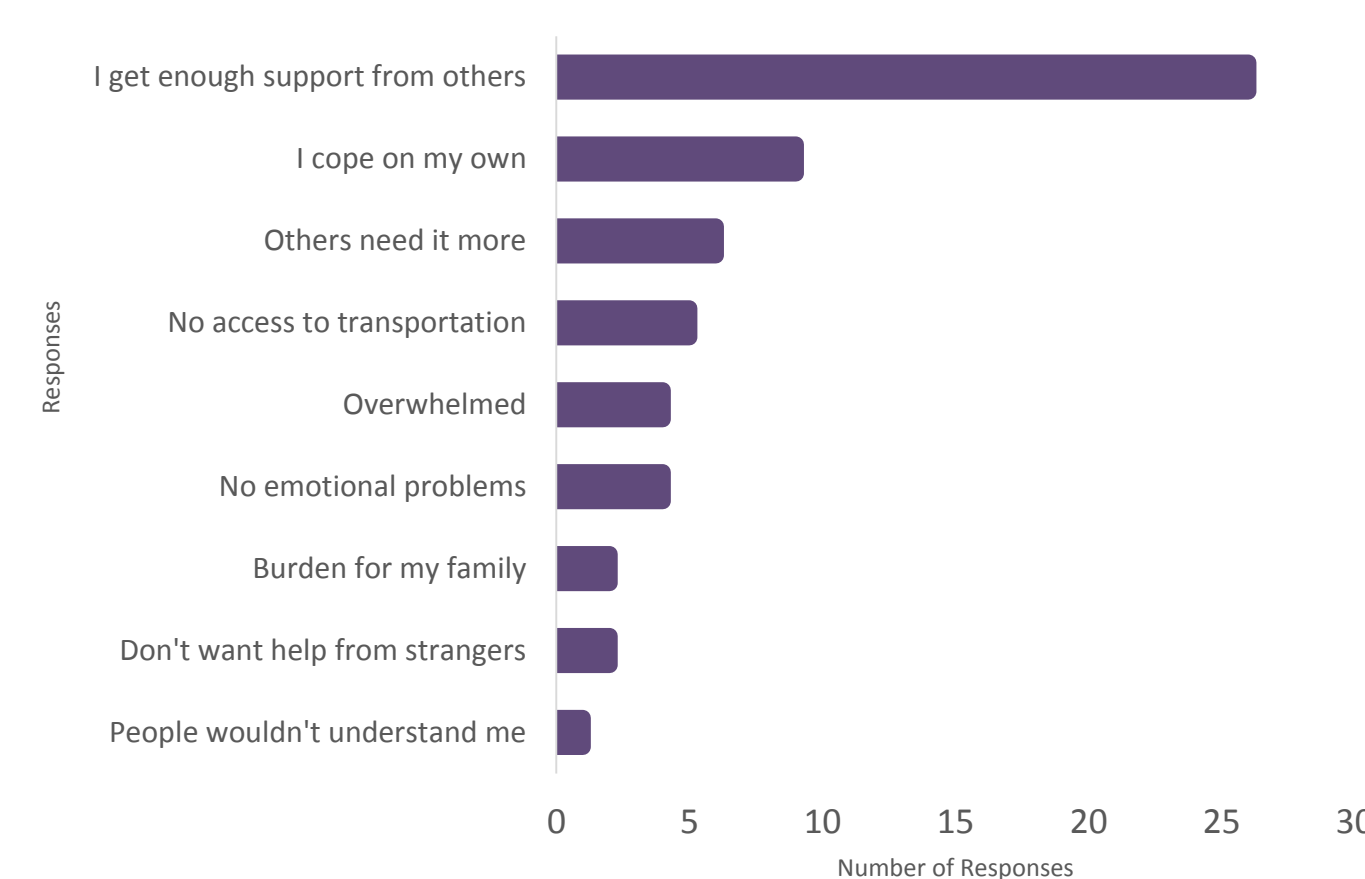


Figure 3. Knowledge of MCHS, MACC Support Group

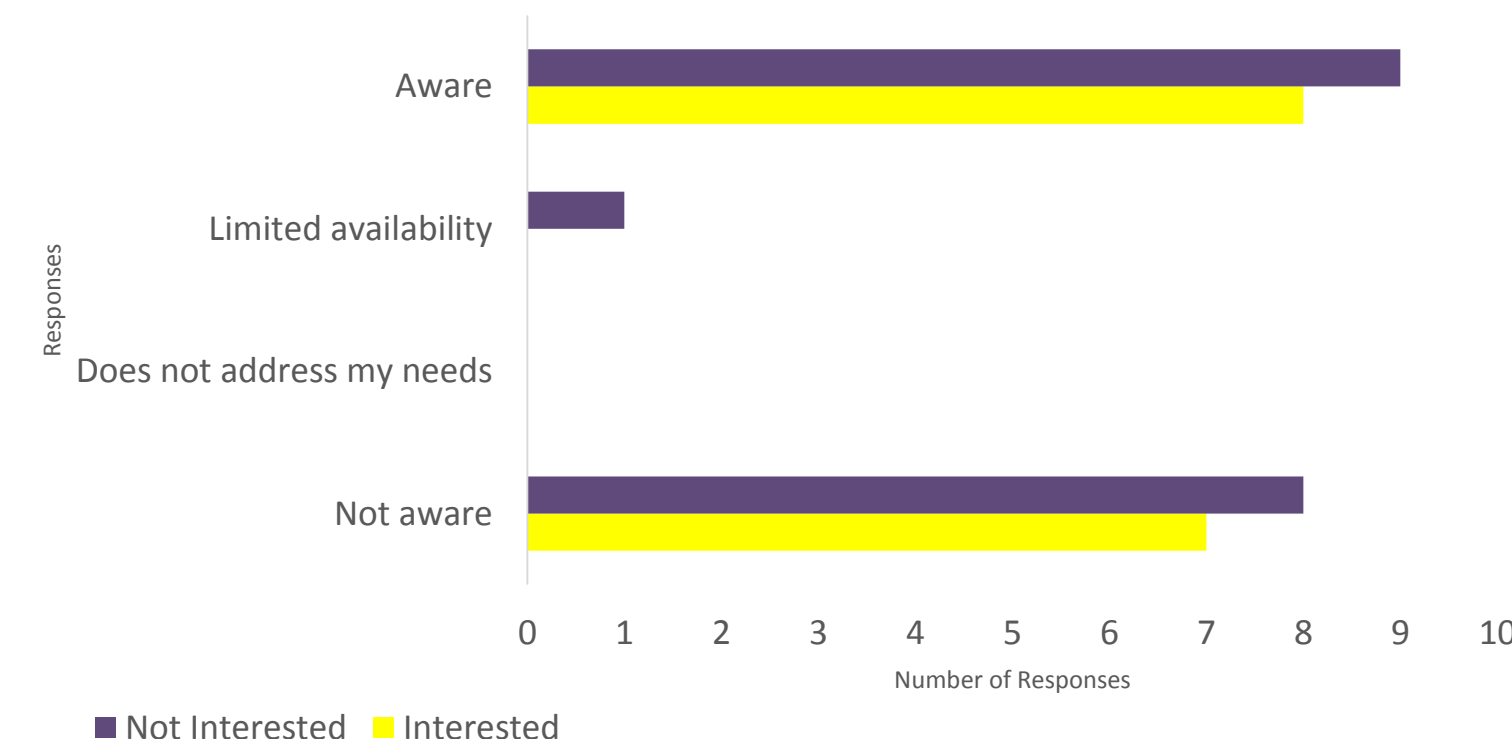


Figure 6. Reasons Men With Cancer Would Utilize a Support Group

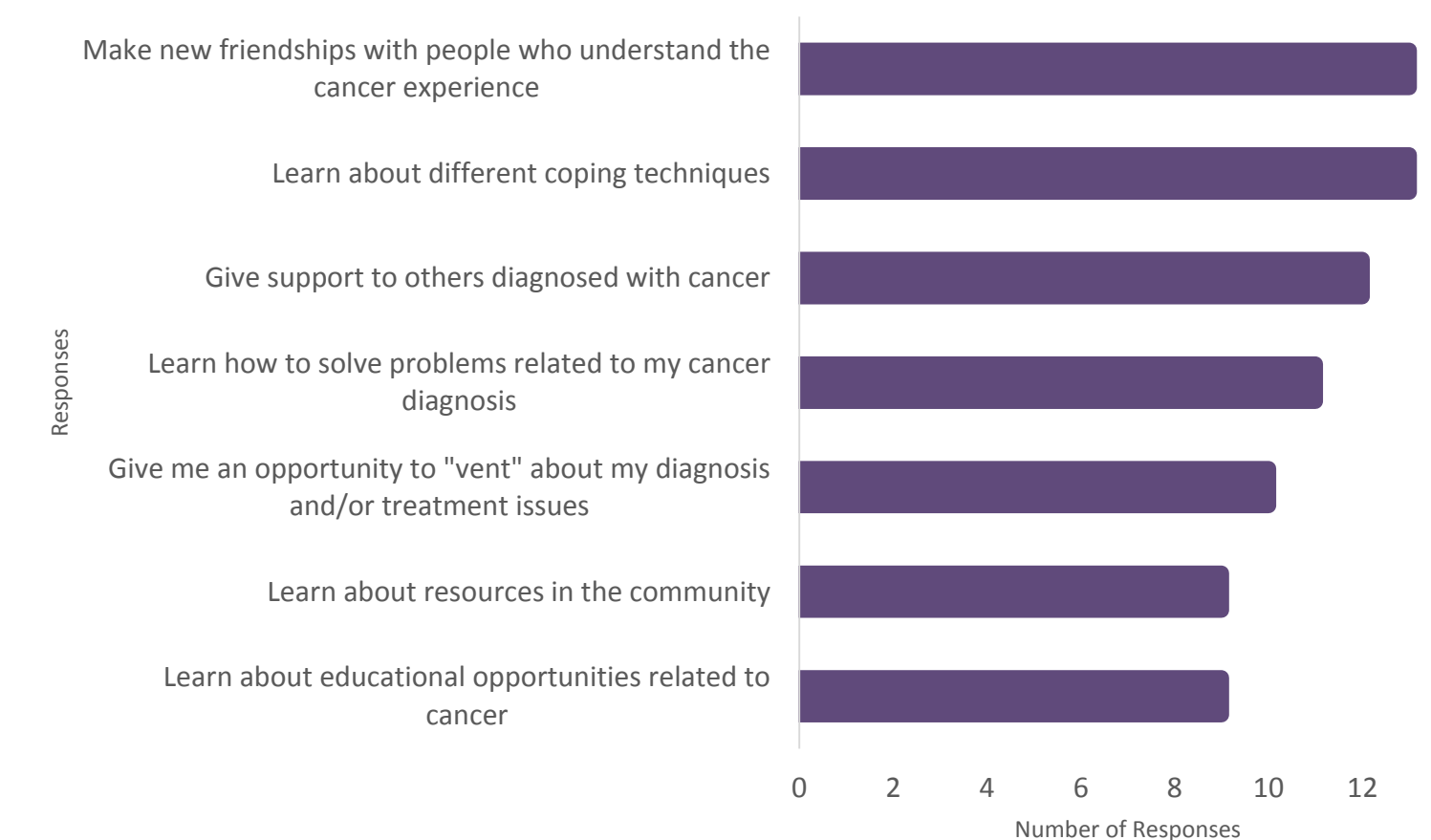
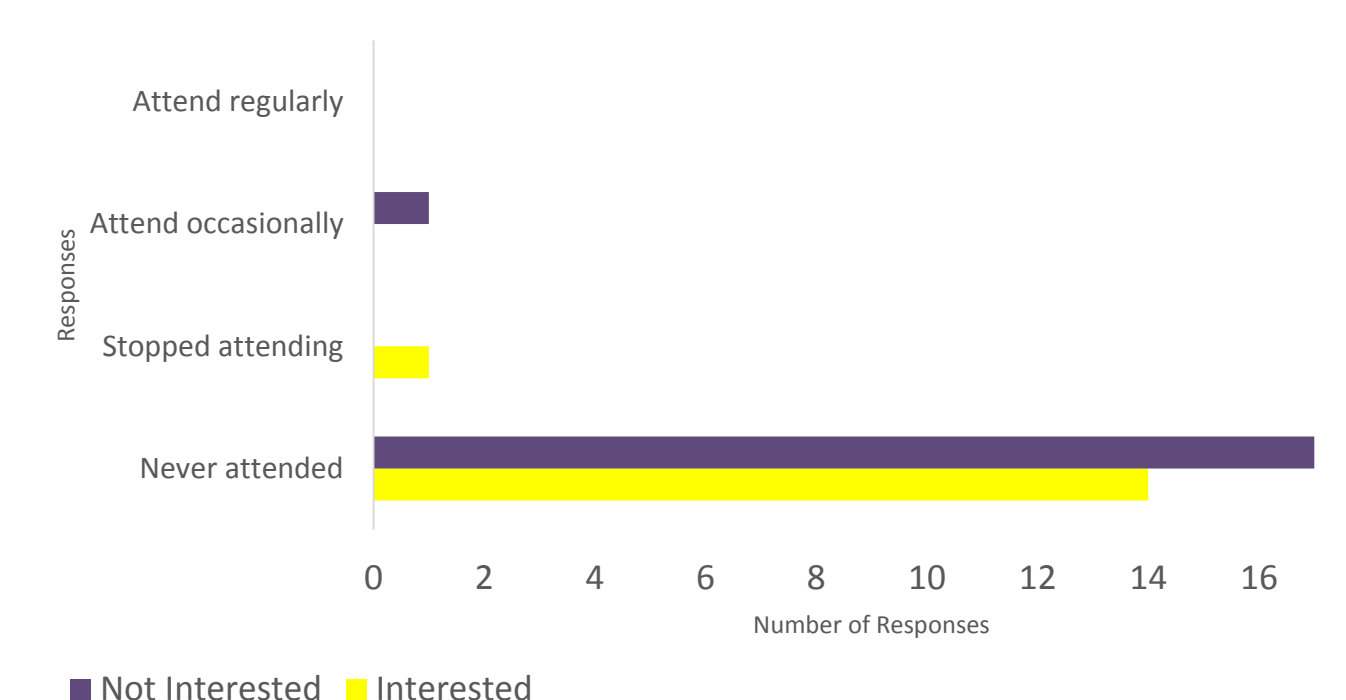


Figure 4. Past or Present Attendance at a Cancer Support Group



Key Findings

- Thirty-five men, of eighty-three potential participants, completed the survey, which was a response rate of 42.16%.
- 15 of the 35 participants (42.9%) indicated they were interested in participating in a men's cancer support group if one were made available to them at the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato Andreas Cancer Center.
- Only 1 of the 15 participants (6.7%) who stated they would be interested in a men's cancer support group indicated they would not have access to transportation to and from a cancer support group as a barrier to their ability to participate in a support group.
- 15 of the 35 participants (42.9%) were not aware that the Andreas Cancer Center offered a cancer support group.
- Most of the men would utilize a support group for both support from others and for educational topics related to their cancer diagnosis.
- The majority of patients (82.83%) indicated they had complete support from friends and family. Only one individual stated they received minimal support, and this individual stated they were not interested in a support group.
- Only 2 of the study participants (6.1%) stated they had attended a support group in the past, which supports existing research that men are not likely to utilize a support group.

Discussion

- Overall, almost half of the study participants indicated they would be interested in a men's cancer support group if one were offered by the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato Andreas Cancer Center.
- Only 1 of the 15 individuals who stated they would be interested in a men's cancer support group indicated that they would not have access to transportation to and from a cancer support group. Our finding that access to transportation was not a concern for the majority of patients who were interested in participating in a men's cancer support group contrasts with what past research has found.
- Research has found that one of the most commonly reported barriers to participation in a support group is a lack of awareness of such a service. These findings appear to support this and may indicate that the organization should consider how they are advertising or marketing the support group which is already in existence.
- A limitation of this study was the small sample size. In addition, positive politeness theory should also be considered. This theory states that people commonly emphasize in-group agreement and avoid disagreement with another person in order to maintain a positive relationship with that individual. Therefore this could partially explain why there was such a high interest level in the patients, which contrasts with what previous research has found.
- Based on these initial results, it is recommended that the Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato Andreas Cancer Center implement a men's cancer support group, and format the group to include both educational as well as supportive aspects within its facilitation.

References and Acknowledgements

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References available upon request.