

A Decrease in the Anxiety Levels of Participants with Autoimmune Disease: Efficacy of a Community-Based Educational Program

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Abstract : People who have autoimmune disease are often at an increased risk for psychological disorders such as anxiety. Untreated psychological conditions can affect the development of disease and can affect one's general quality of life. In this study, it was hypothesized that an educational community-based intervention would be useful in decreasing the anxiety levels of participants with autoimmune disease. Programs, 2-hours long each, were held weekly over a period of eight weeks. During every meeting, a 45-minute DVD presentation by a skilled physician was shown, a small group discussion was guided by trained facilitators, and weekly practical assignments were given to each participant. The focus of the program was to educate participants about healthy lifestyle behaviors such as exercise, nutrition, sleep hygiene, helpful thought patterns etc., and to provide a group environment in which each participant was supported. Participants were assessed pre-post program for anxiety using the Depression and Anxiety Assessment Test (registration TX 7-398-022), a validated mental health test based on DSM-5 criteria and demographics. Anxiety scores were classified according to the DSM-5 criteria into 4 categories: none (0-6), mild (7-10), moderate (11-19) or severe (20 or more). Out of the participants who participated in programs conducted in the manner explained above (n=431), the average age was 54.9 (SD 16.6) and 81.9% were female. At baseline, the mean group anxiety level was 9.4 (SD 5.4). Within the baseline group, anxiety levels were as follows: none (21.1%), mild (22.0%), moderate (27.1%) and severe (29.7%). After the program, mean group anxiety decreased to 4.7 (SD 4.0). Post-program anxiety levels were as follows: none (54.8%), mild (27.1%), moderate (12.5%), severe (5.6%). The decrease in overall anxiety levels was significant $t(431)=19.3$ $p<.001$, 95% CI [0.815, 1.041]. It was concluded that the eight-week intensive was beneficial in decreasing the anxiety levels of participants. A long-term follow-up study would be beneficial in determining how lasting such improvements are especially since autoimmune diseases are often chronic. Additionally, future studies that utilize a control group would aid in establishing whether the improvements seen are due to the use of this specific lifestyle-educational program.

Keywords : anxiety, auto-immune disease, community-based educational program, lifestyle

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