Compassion and cancer

Symposium 3: Tricky bodies, tricky brains: the role of compassion-focused approaches in physical healthcare

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Outline...

The psychosocial impact and social construction of cancer

Emerging clinical evidence – the buffering effect of self-compassion

Compassion-focused approaches in the clinic, team and service system
Living with and beyond cancer...

“It felt like a bad dream. One minute life was chuntering on. The next – well, someone switched the reels… Somewhere, in some parallel universe, life was continuing to chunter on. Here, in this one… the world turned upside down, guilty, I or my body had let us down – him, the kids, me…”

*Cancer Diaries: James Brennan (2004)*

- **Over 2 million people** (and rising) affected by cancer in the UK
- **Psychosocial assault** – mortal threat, uncertainty, arduous treatments
- **Mood/adjustment** – treatment adherence, QoL and relationships
Cancer and collective consciousness...

Cancer is often...

“...felt to be obscene – in the original meaning of that word: ill-omened, abominable, and repugnant to the senses”

“...no mere illness but a demonic enemy...which make it not just a lethal disease but a shameful one”.

Susan Sontag (1978) *Illness as Metaphor*

“Death by hanging, by firing squad, by electric chair: no human being has devised a more brutal execution than death by cancer”.

Lord Maurice Saatchi (2014) *The Times*
Internalising others’ reactions...

The *looking glass self* (George Herbert Mead, 1902)

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Lots of people send lovely messages.

And not so lovely ones.

You are the greatest. Love you so much! XXXXX

All is not lost. You can still save your soul if you meditate every day and eat shiitake mushrooms. An alkaline diet only for you now.

What about media campaigns?... “the fight”, “your battle”, “journey”.

Empirical evidence: cancer and self-blame...


Empirical evidence: role of self-compassion...

- Affiliative dimension of self-compassion predicted lower depression
- ‘Common humanity’ (Neff, 2011) – buffering effect against burden of cancer

Gillanders et al (2015). Illness cognitions, cognitive fusion, avoidance and self-compassion as predictors of distress and QoL in a sample of adults after cancer
- Self-compassion moderated the influence of threatening illness appraisals on distress and avoidant coping strategies

Grozdziej, Medley, Salkovskis et al (submitted). The influence of treatment modality and psychological factors on fear of recurrence and coping behaviours amongst breast cancer survivors
- Psychological impact of more intensive treatment protocols
- **Mental defeat** strongly and inversely associated with self-compassion
Cancer and the emotion systems...

The Drive System
- Loss of confidence
- Reluctance to plan
- Over-striving & defeat

The Soothing System
- Loss of secure base
- Disconnection/isolation
- Self-criticism

The Threat System
- Shock & trauma
- Existential anguish “Why me?”
- Fear & hypervigilance
Affiliation, teams and the service system...

- **Group work:** ‘Moving On Group’ – developing the ‘two psychologies’ (Gilbert & Choden, 2013) of *turning towards* and developing *skills to alleviate* distress.

- **Supporting cancer care teams:** supervision groups and peer support to attend to emotional needs of self and team.

- **Schwartz rounds:** stimulating and sustaining a compassionate conversation across the organisation.
The ‘small’ gestures (of compassion)...

“Some nurses smiled or waved whenever they came to my end of the ward; to others I felt invisible. Sometimes the absence of a smile made me feel desolate... I appreciated it when anyone found a few minutes to spend with me.”

Thank you very much for listening.

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