

Support Network for Young Adults with Multiple Sclerosis

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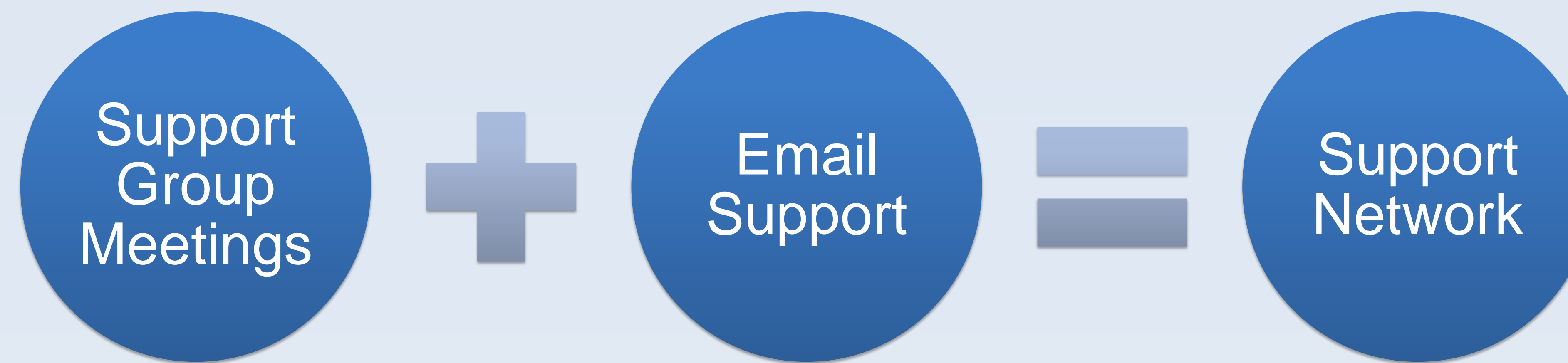
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Introduction

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is the most prevalent neurologic disease affecting young adults. MS patients not only experience physical symptoms, but may also experience psychological problems. These include, but are not limited to, depression and anxiety. The rates of emotional disorders are significantly higher in MS patients than in the general population (Minden, Turner, Kalb & Burke, 2014).

Background

- The complex, unpredictable nature of MS is often difficult to manage for individuals. MS patients often feel comfort speaking to others who understand their daily struggles. They work together to find better coping mechanisms to balance their MS symptoms, work, school, social life and family (LaRocca & Kalb, 2006).
- Support groups are understood to improve psychological well-being (Wakefield, Bickley & Sani, 2013), our MS Care Center has a support group that is open to patients of all ages.
- Younger patients expressed interest in attending a support group; however, when invited to attend our established group, some patients were uncomfortable interacting with patients living with advanced MS for fear of long-term disease progression within themselves.
- Erikson's, stages of development discusses the different needs of adult age groups. Young adults, age 18-40, are searching for intimacy and securing their sense of place in the community. (McLeod, 2008).



Methods

- Erikson's theory provided a foundation to develop more successful support groups by organizing groups by age connecting those with similar needs.
- An advanced practice nurse facilitates the support network for patients with MS age 18-40, consisting of monthly two-hour support group meetings and email support.
- Topics of discussion center on how MS affects a patient's life including cognition, fatigue, nutrition, complementary and alternative medicines, current research, and positive psychology.
- The facilitator consults with nutrition specialists, cognition experts and utilizes National MS Society information packets when applicable.
- Patients receive announcements for upcoming meetings by email and are encouraged to respond with comments or questions regarding the topic.
- Participant ownership is encouraged through the selection of topics, meeting times, and open discourse.

Young Adult Support Group Topics

- Fatigue
- Complimentary and Alternative Therapies
- Current Research
- Positive Psychology
- Cognition
- Nutrition



Results

- Average group size 3-5 MS patients.
- "This is the first time I have met others with MS. I like feeling I am not the only one experiencing these symptoms."
- Patients appreciate the ability to freely discuss concerns and emotions.
- The group members are able to voice frustrations and feelings more freely than when visiting with the doctor or nurse in routine follow-up visits.
- Attendance is encouraged through reminder emails and invitation to the group at office visits.

Conclusions

- The addition of a young-adult support network is a critical factor in promoting wellness in the comprehensive care of MS patients in our practice.
- The continuation of monthly peer support-group meetings will help improve psychological well-being of the participants.
- When patients identify with others experiencing similar disease progression, it will enhance strategies to balance their MS symptoms, work, stress, school, and family issues.

References

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