

THE FEASIBILITY OF AN ONLINE WELLNESS PROGRAM BASED ON GROUP EXERCISE AND THEORY-BASED MODELS OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

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Background:

- Benefits of Exercise for Individuals with MS (IwMS):
 - Physical Function (strength, balance, endurance)
 - Cognition (depression, mood, attention)
 - Socialization
 - ↓ risk of secondary comorbidities
- However, most IwMS are relatively sedentary
- Barriers to physical activity for IwMS:
 - Personal Factors (fatigue, transportation)
 - Availability and cost of wellness programs
- Facilitators to Improving Physical activity:
 - Group Exercise
 - Internet Interventions
 - Theory-Based Interventions:
 - Social Cognitive/Self-Efficacy Theories
 - Transtheoretical Model of Behavioral Change

Objectives:

To test the feasibility of a wellness program incorporating:

- An online interactive interface
- Group Exercise
- Theory-based behavioral interventions
- Educational information specific to IwMS

Methods:

- Participants:
 - 1 male, 4 females recruited from local rehab clinics
 - 4 with moderate MS, 1 with mild MS
 - All reported lower levels of physical activity
- The Wellness Program was conducted online through a Google+ community group:
 - Accessible from the participants' homes
 - Online video chat for the entire group (up to 10 participants)
 - Social media component provided interaction outside of formal sessions
 - Easy distribution of resources
- 4-week program involving 2 group exercise sessions and 2 educational sessions
- Exercises selected from previous research-based wellness programs involving IwMS
- Educational materials were specific to IwMS:
 - Roles of rehab and other healthcare professionals
 - Risk of and effects of comorbidity secondary to a sedentary lifestyle
 - Exercise guidelines (types, frequency, intensity, and duration)
 - Fatigue and Spasticity Management
- Research-based interventions targeting behavioural change via discussion:
 - Identifying barriers and facilitators of exercise
 - Developing and maintaining goals
 - Realistic expectations and striving for the next "level" of physical activity
 - Tracking progress via exercise diary
 - Rewards for maintaining healthy behaviours
- Feedback was provided via phone interview following the wellness program.

Results/Feedback:

- All 5 participants completed the wellness program and provided feedback. They reported:
 - Mild difficulties with the online interface (slow internet connections), but overall feasible and easy to access.
 - Subjective improvements in both intensity and overall physical activity.
- Participants reported they were motivated by:
 - Setting goals
 - Observing others overcome their barriers
 - Relationships formed within the group
- Overall average satisfaction of 4.2/5
- 4/5 participants would continue the program if given the opportunity

Conclusions and Applications

- Online wellness programs are feasible for IwMS:
 - Requires minimal equipment
 - Easily accessible
 - Minimal burden on healthcare professionals
- The demographics of the group should be considered:
 - Number of participants
 - Disease severity
- Similar programs can be developed for other disciplines or support groups

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