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Background

Patients and partners report similar reactions to a cancer diagnosis, including fear, anxiety and distress, with a sizable minority reporting sustained reactions for extended time periods. Such reactions may negatively impact on the wellbeing of both members of the dyad with findings indicating that patient and partner reactions mutually influence how the other person adapts.

To address the psychosocial concerns of couples we developed *Coping-Together*, a novel self-management coping skills intervention. Its primary focus is on the development of practical coping behaviours in the following six areas:

- Communicating with healthcare professionals
- Maintaining relationships
- Accessing community based support
- Making treatment decisions
- Management of symptoms and side effects
- Managing the emotional impact of cancer.

Aims

- To identify core concerns, information provision, information satisfaction, distress, appraisal (illness and caregiving), dyadic adjustment and coping in couples adjusting to a cancer diagnosis.
- To develop a self-management intervention to address gaps in supportive care approaches for couples.

Methods

A randomised controlled trial pilot study of 42 couples recruited from New South Wales and South Australia. Men with prostate cancer and their partners completed a baseline (T1) and follow-up (T2) survey including measures of anxiety, depression, distress, appraisal (of illness and caregiving), quality of life, dyadic adjustment, information needs, biopsychosocial challenges and coping. Couples also completed four fortnightly interviews and an evaluation interview at the end of the study to discuss their experiences and their use of the intervention materials.

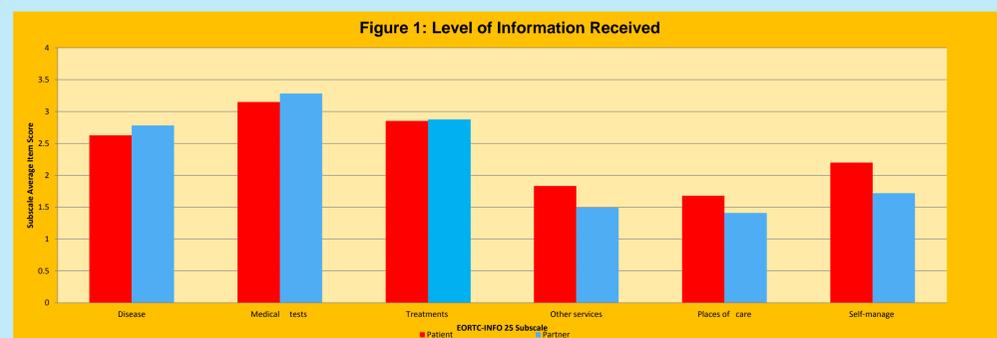
Results

PATIENT & PARTNER NEEDS & INFORMATION

At baseline, patients and partners identified their main concerns as psychosocial rather than medical in nature.

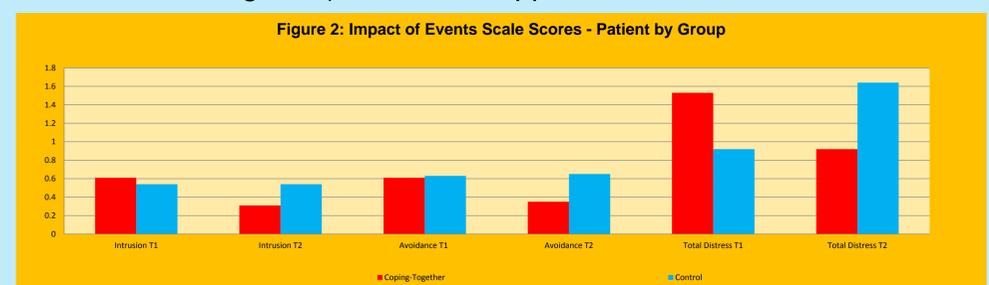
Top Patient Concerns	Top Partner Concerns
1. Side effects	1. Worry about future
2. Losing control	2. Feeling anxious or fearful
3. Worry about future	3. Managing emotions
4. Family coping	4. Side effects
5. Managing emotions	5. Feeling down or depressed

Compared to patients, partners reported receiving significantly less information on psychosocial matters such as support services ($p = .03$) and self-care ($p = .03$) (Figure 1); and were less satisfied with information received ($p = 0.007$).

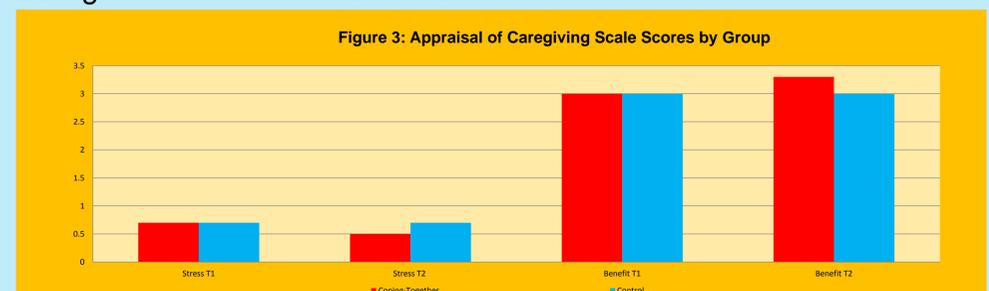


PATIENT & PARTNER PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTCOMES

Initial pilot testing found patients in the *Coping-Together* intervention demonstrated a trend (defined as $p < 0.3$) towards improvements in distress (avoidance, intrusion and total distress as measured by Impact of Events Scale, Figure 2) and illness appraisal.



For partners, trends were found towards improvements in caregiving appraisal (general stress and perceived benefit as measured by the Appraisal of Caregiving Scale, Figure 3), and illness appraisal, reduced caregiver burden and financial strain.



Interviews were conducted fortnightly and at the conclusion of the study to explore use of the materials and identify required changes. This qualitative data highlighted some benefits of the *Coping-Together* intervention, but also some areas for improvement and future directions.

Aiding communication

“The one I liked the most was about talking to healthcare professionals ... It's handy to have your questions organised so that you get those in ... It gave me ideas on questions to ask about things that I may or may not have been clear about” (Patient)

“The Top Tips newsletters summarise everything concisely. They're good to have ... we put them on the kitchen bench and if the kids come they can pick them up.” (Partner)

Reminder of skills

“For me it probably confirmed a lot of things that I already knew ... it triggered off memories and coping mechanisms that I already had, it was useful in that. And it sort of gave me a bit of confidence.” (Partner)

Improvements

Diagnosis specific information: “The information that I was really interested in wasn't contained within the pack. There was broad stroke information, rather than the specifics that would have been helpful to us.” (Partner)

Timing of intervention: “If you had it prior to treatment, ... when you're sort of starting off your journey it's good but getting in when we did [post surgery] it was past the time.” (Partner)

Future Directions

“Have it so you could tailor it to the person involved ... You'd have to have a quiz first ... just find out the sorts of things they wanted to know and give them the bits of the resource that they wanted straight up.” (Patient)

Conclusions

Coping-Together potentially addresses the psychosocial needs of couples dealing with cancer in a way that is feasible, acceptable and sustainable due to its self-directed nature. Consideration of the type of information desired by participants, timely receipt of the intervention and potential tailoring of content emerged as key considerations.