

# Social support in group online exercise oncology classes



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## The Purpose

–Social support can be facilitated through exercise programs for people living with cancer, but there is limited research on how best to foster it in online exercise oncology classes.

–The purpose of this study was to:

1. Identify the current practices for training fitness professionals to provide and facilitate social support in group online exercise oncology classes
2. Understand the experiences of adults living with and beyond cancer with social support from other exercises and fitness professionals in group online exercise oncology classes
3. Identify behaviours and barriers for providing (by fitness professionals) and obtaining (by adults living with and beyond cancer) social support in group online exercise oncology classes



## The Study

–Qualitative case study guided by interpretive description methodology

–Data gathered from 5 sources:

1. Review of staff training materials for exercise oncology programs
2. Observations of fitness professional training session
3. Observations of online exercise classes
4. Interviews with fitness professionals
5. Interviews with adults living with cancer

–Participants:

- 15 fitness professionals (3 males and 12 females, 21–44 years of age)
- 19 adults living with and beyond cancer (5 males and 14 females, 24–74 years of age)



# RESULTS – Creating a welcoming environment



## Providing a comfortable space



Behaviours that helped participants feel relaxed and be themselves through sharing, seeking social support, and listening were supportive.

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Encourage exercisers to respect each other's treatment decisions
- Make themselves available as a support person
- Ask participants what SS they want
- Ask participants what support they have at home while exercising
- Get to know the group
- Relate to participants about being sore and tired during exercise
- Help participants learn technology

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Listen or comfort if needed
- Share resources, advice about cancer
- Discuss and empathize about with cancer experience



Barriers related to feeling uncomfortable in the online environment

- Having a cancer diagnosis in common is not always enough to form relationships
- Not having a previous in person connection with other participants
- Familiarity or comfort with technology

## Engaging participants in social interactions



Behaviours that engaged participants in social interactions helped develop relationships and foster a cohesive group

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Encourage participants to stay unmuted
- Encourage and give time before and after class to socialize and ask questions
- Use language to foster group or community
- Encourage to seeking SS
- Interactive warm-up, exercises, activities
- Ask the question of the day
- Call on participants to speak

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Acknowledge things happening on screen
- Ask questions and engage in group conversation
- Facilitate or encourage connection outside of class
- Introduce new participants and include them in conversation and activities
- Interact during the class
- Greet, check-in, use names



Barriers related to not having time or opportunities to engage and challenges to communicating online

- Unable to meet in person outside of class due to COVID
- Fitness professional and/or participants do not come to class early or stay late
- Little opportunity to socialize or provide support because of online format
- Cannot use chat function while exercising
- Interaction can be disruptive to the exercise class
- Fitness professional or participants do not interact with the group
- Others bringing up divisive topics of conversation, might not be inclusive
- Publicly asking participants to speak might make them uncomfortable
- Difficult to make connections between new and experienced participants
- Hard for new participants to join in conversation
- Difficult to feel like a group or team
- Embodied social interaction is different (e.g., difficult to read nonverbal cues, cannot feel the presence of others)
- Can only have group conversations, less opportunity for one-on-one interactions
- Fitness professionals and participants need to take turns talking
- Not enough time for everyone to share
- Difficult for fitness professionals to build rapport, start and moderate conversations, facilitate cross-talk
- Fitness professionals must lead the discussion and be the main person talking, do not always feel prepared to do so

## Being open with others



Behaviours that helped participants open up and share with the group were supportive.

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Remember things about each other, follow-up
- Share stories, personal life, interests

Supportive behaviours **other exercisers** can do:

- Share about cancer, treatments



Barriers related to having little opportunity to share and not knowing the others well enough to feel comfortable opening up

- Not comfortable opening up because it is difficult getting to know personalities, interests, and personal lives
- Not comfortable opening up because one does not think group wants to hear about one's problems
- Difficult to recognize if others are struggling and express support
- Little opportunity to talk about cancer
- Difficult to connect to others if one does not see one's own culture or representation in the group

## Positive and upbeat



Behaviours that created a fun and energetic environment were supportive.

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Plays energetic, upbeat music

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Upbeat, energetic, personable
- Celebrate or compliment each other
- Have fun, laugh, and joke

Supportive behaviours **other exercisers** can do:

- Acknowledge their adversity while suggesting positive reframing of cancer experience
- Role model living a happy, positive life despite cancer
- Encourage, share kind words with those going through treatment



Barriers related comparison amongst exercisers or not being open to exercise corrections:

- Other exercisers comparing or critiquing others treatment decisions
- Other exercisers not being open to fitness professionals' exercise corrections or advice



# RESULTS - Helping improve exercise ability and reach goals



## Supporting mastery →

Behaviours that supported the mastery of physical skills and development of mastery (personal improvement, limiting judgements based on comparison) were supportive

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Explain exercises in multiple ways to aid understanding
- Word feedback as what they can do versus what they should not do
- Check-in during exercise, re-demonstrate if needed
- Ask if anyone has questions
- Provide high-quality workouts
- Provide individualized feedback
- Provide modifications
- Ask about injuries and side effects of each participant so they can be accommodated
- Reassure that nobody is watching participants exercise, nobody is there to judge
- Express pride in participants who came to class
- Acknowledge when exercise is done well
- Help to goal-set

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Celebrate when physical activity goals are achieved
- Suggest equipment for participants to use or try
- Role model, challenge, or push each other to exercise



Barriers related to characteristics of the group setting and limitations of interacting online

- Difficult for fitness professionals to see participants
- Cannot physically correct form
- Cannot provide feedback privately
- Difficult to individualize for each person
- Feel judged or compared to others
- Those with higher skill level or physical ability feel they are showing off if they push themselves

## Encouraging →

Behaviours that encouraged physical activity during and beyond the class were supportive

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Draw positive attention to participants
- Provide motivational talk
- High five the screen
- Remind to not be discouraged when physical ability is not the same as before treatment

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Encourage or help engage in other physical activity
- Encourage to come back each week
- Provide individualized and general encouragement

## Supporting autonomy →

Behaviours that gave freedom to program participants to control and choose their physical activity behaviour were experienced as supportive

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Encourage to listen to body, modify or adjust to accommodate needs
- Do not push when participants share they are not feeling well
- Encourage to progress at own pace
- Ask what they want to get out of class
- Encourage to interrupt if needed
- Give options to choose exercises
- Invite suggestions, feedback
- Incorporates participant music suggestions



Barriers related to fitness professionals not having as many opportunities to allow participants to control their behaviour in the online environment

- Cannot choose who to talk to during exercise
- Participants are not always aware they can choose whatever exercises they want

## Participating together →

Behaviours by other exercisers that enabled participation in exercise was supportive

Supportive behaviours **other exercisers** can do:

- Commit, show-up to class
- Exercise together outside of class
- Join the same class to stay exercising together



Barriers pertained to having no social connections with others in the class and others not being committed themselves

- Not having connections with others makes it easier to skip class
- Social connections do not motivate participants to attend
- When others do not commit, participants do not want to commit

## Informational support →

Behaviours that provided information and resources about physical activity to participants were supportive

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** can do:

- Communicate the benefits of exercise
- Email exercises information about class
- Share exercise circuit instructions in the chat

Supportive behaviours **fitness professionals** and **other exercisers** can do:

- Suggest resources or activities to do or use between classes

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## Take Home Messages

It is important for fitness professionals to provide support for exercise through quality exercise instruction, encouragement, and giving participants control over their exercise behaviour, but also to foster an environment where participants feel comfortable opening-up, being vulnerable, engaging in conversation, and sharing about their experiences and personal lives.

Forming connections with the instructor and other exercises can help many participants to commit and feel motivated to show-up to exercise.

There are many barriers impacting interaction, socialization, and receiving/providing exercise instruction in the online exercise environment, so fitness professionals and participants need to be intentional and implement strategies to provide social support.

Fitness professionals valued SS in their exercise classes and welcomed training or evidence-based practices (examples or behaviours) for providing and facilitating SS.



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