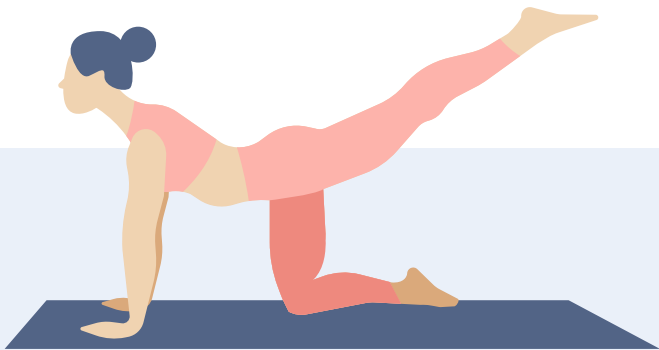


# SOCIALLY SUPPORTIVE AND UNSUPPORTIVE BEHAVIORS IN GROUP EXERCISE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH CANCER



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## PURPOSE

To examine participants' **perceptions** of and **experiences** with **social support behaviors** in group exercise programs for people living with cancer from the perspective of social support theory.

## METHODS

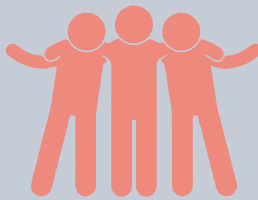
Reflexive thematic analysis using interviews and focus groups.  
24 adults living with cancer (19 women and 5 men, 41-75 years of age).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What **behaviors** do participants experience as **supportive** in the group exercise program?
- 2) What **kinds** of **social support** are provided by **instructors** and **other participants** in group exercise programs?
- 3) What social support attempts are experienced as **helpful** or **not helpful**?

## RESULTS

### “I CAN COUNT ON THESE PEOPLE”: DEVELOPING CARING RELATIONSHIPS



This theme describes social support that helped participants **feel connected** to and **develop relationships** with others. It is a **foundational** type of social support that helped participants transition from strangers or casual acquaintances who come together to participate in physical activity, to **members of a social network** who could provide other supportive functions.

- *Building friendships and connections through conversation, sharing interests, and invitations*
- *Instructors facilitating introductions and social interaction*
- *Hesitation to and vulnerability with forming relationships in a cancer context*

### “THERE’S NOTHING YOU SHOULDN’T TRY”: NURTURING A DESIRE FOR SEEKING AND SEIZING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

This theme focuses on social support that encouraged participants to **seek opportunities** by **participating together**, **encouraging**, and **celebrating successes**. This theme generally dealt with supporting physical activity participation.

- *Encouragement and enthusiasm from peers and instructors*
- *Celebrating successes and inspiring each other through role modeling*
- *Motivation to try new activities and commit to physical activity*



[Project Website](#)



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## “HELP TO GET THROUGH THIS IN THE BEST WAY POSSIBLE”: FACILITATING PREPARATION FOR ENGAGEMENT IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



This theme describes social support that gave participants **tools** and helped **develop their abilities** to engage in physical activity. This theme focused on promoting **strategies, skills, and resources** for approaching opportunities.

- *Instructors teaching proper technique, safety, and modifications*
- *Providing tools, strategies, and individualized adjustments*
- *Peers helping set up equipment and sharing common goals*

## “YOU’RE NOT ALONE IN THIS”: HELPING TO FULLY ENGAGE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

This type of social support provided people with the **security** and **assistance** needed to **fully engage** and **extend** themselves.

- *Exercising alongside peers and sharing tips*
- *Role modeling perseverance and thriving despite limitations*
- *Creating a secure base for exploring other PA opportunities*
- *Risk when encouragement becomes competitive or insensitive*



## “A LARGE CIRCLE OF LOVE AROUND ME”: A SAFE HAVEN OF CARE, CONNECTION, AND UNDERSTANDING



This theme focuses on providing a **safe haven**, a type of social support that encourages people to feel comfortable **seeking comfort** and **assistance** in times of stress. We identified three subthemes:

### “An Understanding That Nobody Has to Explain”: Understanding of and Empathizing With the Cancer Experience

- *Shared lived experiences, empathy, check-ins, compassion from instructors; but hearing about challenges could be overwhelming*

### “It’s Okay to Have Cancer”: Normalizing the Cancer Experience

- *Talking openly about cancer (or not), role modeling moving forward, being authentic about cancer experience; being overly positive could be seen as lacking vulnerability and not relatable*

### “The One Place Where I Don’t Get Unsolicited Help or Support”: Not Pushing Participants to be Someone They Are Not

- *Respecting choices, offering advice only when wanted, providing space to be themselves*



## MAIN TAKEAWAYS

- It is important to consider both how supportive behaviors in physical activity can contribute to coping and living with cancer, and how they can promote thriving through learning skills, pursuing goals, and being positively challenged through physical activity.
- The theme "developing caring relationships" highlights that in physical activity contexts providing support for developing relationships with other participants is an important first step in obtaining other types of social support.
- Unsupportive behaviors can occur in exercise oncology classes. It is important to be aware of conversations that may be overwhelming, insensitive, or inauthentic, and to minimize pressure or competitiveness in the physical activity.

“BECAUSE IT WASN’T CALLED A SUPPORT GROUP, IF SOMEONE WOULD HAVE SAID ... A SUPPORT GROUP BASED ON EXERCISE I STILL PROBABLY WOULD HAVE WENT THE OTHER WAY. I THINK THE SUPPORT YOU GET IS A NATURAL FLOW THAT JUST HAPPENS ... YOU’RE NOT WALKING AROUND STARING AT EACH OTHER. YOU’RE DOING SOMETHING.”