

Journal watch

Anxiety and its management in advanced cancer

[Psychological and cognitive
problems]

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Abstract

Purpose of review: As patients enter the palliative phase of their illness, both physical and psychological burdens change. Anxiety commonly increases as patients become aware of both the relative ineffectiveness of medical treatments in halting the progress of their disease and, consequently, their limited life expectancy. This review will allow clinicians to be more effective in helping patients manage their psychological distress.

Recent findings: Anxious cancer patients facing death may often be plagued with recurrent unpleasant thoughts including fears of pain, of death and of dependency on others. In the palliative care setting it may not be easy to distinguish the somatic causes of anxiety from the psychological ones; in addition, anxiety may be a manifestation of either depression, delirium or another medical problem. The most effective management of anxiety often involves psychotherapy, behavioural therapy and pharmacological management.

Summary: It is our hope that this article will inform oncologists, oncology nurses and mental health workers about the prevalence, assessment and treatment options for anxiety in advanced cancer patients. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of research in this field; we hope that this article will encourage the motivation for more studies to assess different treatments for anxiety in this population.

Strength:

Focuses on the cognitive psychological aspect of anxiety

Describes the indications and contraindications of psychotherapeutic interventions

Reminds clinician of importance of using psychotherapeutic interventions in the cases of mild to moderate anxiety

Applicable to advanced cancer patients

Weakness:

It is not a systematic review

Does not elaborate on the applicability of the combination of antianxiety medications and psychotherapeutic interventions

Relevance to Palliative care:

The authors' goal is to focus on palliative care patients with anxiety disorder and elaborate on differentiating different types of anxiety in addition to discussing different psychotherapeutic interventions that are applicable to this population.