

Mindfulness and Mental Health of Cancer Caregivers: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

The role of cancer caregivers is extremely important, helpful, and demanding in the context of cancer patients, and it often leads to various mental and physical challenges for caregivers, including stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, burden, and a decline in quality of life (QoL). Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have emerged as a promising, simple, and non-pharmacological strategy to address these concerns. This review paper examines how MBIs improve mental health in cancer caregivers, including distress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, burden, quality of life, and sleep quality. A comprehensive literature review was conducted on the present topic using databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Web of Science. This review included 35 relevant studies published between 2014 and 2024, comprising randomized controlled trials (RCTs), non-randomized trials, and qualitative research. All of these studies evaluated mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) that have a positive impact on caregivers' mental health. The findings indicate that interventions like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) are effective in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, caregiver burden and fatigue, while also improving quality of life, and sleep quality. This review concludes that, mindfulness-based interventions are a beneficial, useful, and simple method that positively impacts caregivers' mental health.

Keywords: *Cancer Caregivers, Mental Health, Mindfulness-Based Interventions*

Cancer continues to pose a significant threat to global health. According to estimates from the Global Cancer Observatory (GLOBOCAN), there were 19.3 million new cancer cases globally in 2020 (Sung et al., 2020). India ranked third in the number of cases, following China and the United States. GLOBOCAN projects that by 2040, cancer cases in India will rise to 2.08 million, marking a 57.5% increase compared to 2020 (Piñeros et al., 2021). The growing number of cancer patients and the decreasing health of survivors pose new challenges not just for the patients, but also for their caregivers. These caregivers are spouses, parents, friends, or neighbors' who provide care for cancer patients. Caregivers make every effort to address all of the patient's requirements (e.g., physical, mental, and medical) over the long term. To do so, individuals must devote time and effort, which frequently causes some challenges in areas such as personal life, social relationships, mental

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well-being, and financial stability. These problems are exacerbated when caregivers experience their ill loved ones in distress, suffer the unpredictable progression of the illness, and see them affected by undesirable health outcomes. As a result, caregivers frequently experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, increased burden, reduced quality of life (QoL), and sleep-related problems (Applebaum & Breitbart, 2013; Bevans & Sternberg, 2012).

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that involves the conscious focus of attention on present-moment sensations. It is derived from Buddhist contemplative traditions and requires mindfulness, openness, curiosity, and a nonjudgmental attitude. Since the 1970s, clinical psychology and psychiatry have created multiple mindfulness-based treatment techniques that are used to help people coping with a variety of psychological problems (Harrington & Dunne, 2015). Mindfulness practice has been used to reduce depression (Reangsing et al., 2021), stress (Van Gordon et al., 2015), and anxiety (Jain et al., 2015), as well as in the treatment of substance addiction (Chiesa & Serretti, 2014). Therefore, mindfulness practice can serve as a preventive strategy to stop the development of mental health problems. Similarly, Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), particularly Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) also have positive impact on the mental health of cancer caregivers. Therefore, to explore this subject, the present review paper includes several research studies related to it.

Mindfulness and Distress of Cancer Caregivers

Family, friends, and especially the partners of cancer patients also have to face the psychological impacts of the disease. More than 50% of partners of cancer patients report negative emotional effects related to caregiving. Nearly 40% of partners of patients with advanced-stage cancer report high levels of psychological distress (Mosher, 2012). Therefore, regardless of the type or stage of cancer, caregivers inevitably face stress. In this context, mindfulness holds significant importance in managing such stress. Schellekens et al. (2014) have found that the MBSR technique helps reduce stress not only in patients but also in their caregivers. Kubo et al. (2018) pre and post-intervention study stated that an online-based mindfulness intervention led to a reduction in stress levels among caregivers. Noei et al. (2022) study revealed that a mindfulness self-compassion training program, which was provided as a one-month intervention to caregivers of patients with cancer, resulted in a reduction in their psychological distress. The mediation analysis found that cancer patients with higher levels of dispositional mindfulness experienced fewer negative emotions, and their caregivers also experienced lower levels of stress (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, the results of various studies confirm that mindfulness is highly beneficial not only for cancer patients but also for their caregivers.

Mindfulness, Anxiety, and Depression of Cancer Caregivers

Mindfulness-based interventions are associated with reductions in the severity of anxiety and depression in cancer caregivers. Kubo et al. (2018), which is based on a mindfulness intervention and conducted on both cancer patients and their caregivers, indicates that the patients who participated along with their caregivers demonstrated a slightly higher adherence rate compared to those who participated alone. The study also indicates that the mindfulness intervention led to a statistically significant reduction in distress levels among caregivers and a decrease in depression. Their physical health-related QoL scores improved, and there was a reduction in fatigue. However, no changes were observed in anxiety, mental health-related QoL scores, or sleep quality. Hsieh et al. (2018) suggested that mindful-awareness and self-compassionate actions proved to be protective factors for caregivers,

reducing the impact of caregiving-related stress and their depressive symptoms. Hecht et al. (2021) study that is based on cancer caregivers' trait mindfulness, found that caregivers who have higher levels of trait mindfulness reported lower levels of depression, and greater caregiver quality of life. Therefore, the mindfulness program has a beneficial effect on the psychological well-being of both patients and their caregivers.

Mindfulness and Fatigue of Cancer Caregivers

Fatigue, which includes both physical and mental exhaustion, has been a common concern among cancer caregivers. The persistent fatigue experienced by caregivers is mostly due to the cumulative burden of physical care tasks, emotional support obligations, and psychological stress of dealing with a loved one's illness, often exacerbated by the caregiver's responsibilities (Lengacher et al., 2012). This fatigue manifests as physical exhaustion and cognitive exhaustion, which can adversely affect both caregivers' well-being and their ability to provide care. MBIs such as MBSR and MBCTs aim to accommodate fatigue by promoting relaxation, increasing present-moment awareness, and reducing stress by integrating practices such as meditation, body scanning, and mindful-movement (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2012).

Metin et al. (2019) reported that the participants in the mindful-meditation group had higher levels of fatigue at the beginning, and after practicing mindful-meditation for 12–14 weeks, a reduction in their fatigue levels was observed. Johns et al. (2015) study found that the MBSR group showed positive improvements in fatigue-related outcomes compared to the control group after the 7-week intervention. Similarly, in another study, the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based cognitive group therapy intervention was evaluated. After a 9-week intervention with cancer survivors, the results showed a reduction in severe fatigue (Van Der Lee & Garssen, 2012). Thus, MBIs are a promising treatment for cancer-related fatigue (CRF) and its associated symptoms; however, further research with standardized, larger methodologies and more diverse samples is needed in this area.

Mindfulness and Burden of Cancer Caregivers

The existing literature has widely discussed the kind of burden caregivers' bear when caring for a seriously ill loved one, particularly cancer patients (Li et al., 2022). The cancer trajectory affects not only patients but also their caregivers, causing distress and burden. This caregiver burden includes emotional and physical health challenges when caregiving demands exceed resources. MBI is a supportive approach to enhance psychological well-being and reduce caregiver burden among caregivers of patients with chronic illnesses (Tkatch et al., 2017). In a meta-analysis, Erdoğan Yüce (2024) included a total of 12 studies and reported from the pooled evidence that MBIs led to positive improvement in caregiver burden among caregivers of adults with chronic illnesses; however, they had no significant effect on quality of life and resilience.

A systematic review conducted by AI Daken and Ahmad (2018) reported that MBIs enhanced general mental well-being and showed the potential to reduce caregiver burden among caregivers of cancer patients. Two separate meta-analyses conducted on caregivers of patients with chronic illnesses reported that MBIs were not effective in reducing caregiver burden (Liu et al., 2017; Saragih et al., 2024). Thus, the effects of mindfulness-based interventions on the physical and psychological well-being of caregivers have been observed in some studies, while not found in others. Therefore, there is a need for high-quality randomized controlled trials with large sample sizes in this area.

Mindfulness and Quality of Life of Cancer Caregivers

Cancer caregivers' mindfulness and quality of life are multidimensional constructs that include psychological, social, physical, and spiritual well-being. Cancer caregivers' persistent thoughts about medical care, emotional attachment, and personal and professional obligations often lead to decreased quality of life. These challenges often lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation. A study using a pre-posttest design found that an 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which included relaxation, meditation, and daily home practices, led to a significant improvement in quality of life scores (Castellar et al., 2014). Mindful meditation (MM) is significantly helpful in improving both the physical aspects of quality of life, such as pain, inflammation, fatigue, and sleep quality, and the psychological aspects, such as psychological distress, stress, depression, emotional regulation, and spiritual well-being (Bower et al., 2014; Johns et al., 2015; Kenne Sarenmalm et al., 2017; Ngamkham et al., 2019; Yun et al., 2017).

Kubo et al. (2018) also stated that a mobile/online-based (mHealth) mindfulness intervention improved the quality of life of individuals affected by cancer and their caregivers. Another study found a similar result that audio-based mindful-meditation has a positive effect on the quality of life of both patients and their caregivers (Atreya et al., 2018). A systematic literature review done by Sharma et al. (2021) found that in several studies, mindfulness interventions had improved quality of life among cancer patients as well as caregivers. Thus, mindfulness practices such as frequent body scans, meditation, and conscious breathing enhanced a sense of self-acceptance in caregivers, helping them to reduce negative thinking and rediscover a sense of meaning and moments of joy amid the challenges of the caregiving mindset.

Mindfulness and sleep quality of cancer caregivers

One of the most common problems faced by cancer caregivers is a sleep disturbance. This issue often arises due to chronic stress, irregular routines, emotional strain, and the physical demands associated with the caregiving role. Mindfulness interventions for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and their caregivers have been shown to improve sleep quality (Kubo et al., 2018; Milbury et al., 2019). Johns et al. (2015) examined the impact of the MBSR approach on individuals recovering from cancer. Their findings revealed that after the implementation of the intervention, the experimental group experienced improved sleep quality along with significant reductions in stress, fatigue, and depression. Similarly, Lengacher et al. (2015) conducted a 12-week MBSR program and observed enhanced sleep quality among patients diagnosed with breast cancer. Werner et al. (2017) have established that sleep is the mechanism through which mindfulness and mental health are interconnected, and that sleep quality functions as a moderator for mental health. Several studies have examined the effect of trait mindfulness on cancer caregivers' sleep quality. The findings indicate that trait mindfulness is positively associated with improved sleep quality (Hecht et al., 2021; Howell et al., 2010). Thus, by practicing mindfulness-based exercises properly in daily life, sleep quality can be improved.

DISCUSSION

Family caregivers play an extremely important role in the treatment and care of cancer patients, and they have a profound and positive impact on the patients' health status. The physical and mental health of caregivers is greatly affected by this illness. The above-mentioned studies also indicate that caregivers face numerous challenges. Therefore, they can be considered as co-patients. To maintain their well-being and address their needs, proper management should be ensured both within the family and in hospital settings. This

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should include psychological interventions that help them remain relaxed, positive, and functional.

Mindfulness has gained attention as a promising approach to support the psychological well-being of cancer caregivers. In the above-mentioned studies, various mindfulness-based interventions have been applied to caregivers, such as MBSR, MBCT, and Mindfulness-Based Cancer Stress Management (MBCSM) etc. Although the number of these studies is limited but their findings have been positive, indicating that these interventions are practical, acceptable, and effective in enhancing the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of family caregivers of cancer patients. These mindfulness-based interventions have proven to be highly beneficial in reducing caregiver burden, stress, depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and they also contribute significantly to improving their psychological well-being and quality of life.

Cancer caregivers also experience physical distress, such as sleep disturbances. MBIs have been found to help improve sleep quality and reduce sleep-related problems, but there is still very limited evidence available in this regard. Therefore, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions.

Implementing MBIs in palliative care settings is particularly challenging because patients in palliative care are in a very critical condition, and caregivers often feel deeply saddened, hopeless, and anxious about their loved one's life. Hence, it is necessary to implement MBIs in the simplest possible form in such situations. Moreover, there is also a need to conduct appropriate and adequate research on the caregivers of palliative care patients.

The findings from the above-mentioned studies are quite positive; however, there is a need for more controlled and large-scale studies in the future to provide solid evidence regarding the effectiveness of MBIs.

CONCLUSION

In India, there is an adequate workforce trained in general healthcare; however, professionals specifically trained in cancer care are limited and mostly concentrated in urban areas. Although efforts are being made and gradual progress is underway, much more still needs to be done to support all cancer patients and their caregivers. The mental health of cancer caregivers is just as important as the health of the patients they care for. Mindfulness offers a compassionate, accessible, and evidence-based path that promotes emotional balance, mental resilience, and inner strength. When caregivers learn to care for themselves through mindfulness, they become more capable of caring for patients with greater presence, patience, and empathy. Promoting mindfulness among caregivers not only improves their quality of life but also enriches the caregiving process itself. Research consistently shows that the practice of mindfulness helps caregivers manage their mental health more effectively and develop emotional flexibility.

This review has yielded important findings regarding the effectiveness of MBIs in enhancing the psychological well-being of caregivers of individuals affected by cancer. It has been determined that MBIs are effective and feasible in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and caregiver burden, and are also helpful in maintaining a good quality of life. These findings can guide clinicians to adopt mindfulness-based interventions for caregivers. Additionally, it is also recommended that high-quality randomized controlled trials (RCTs)

with larger sample sizes be conducted to determine the impact of mindfulness-based interventions on the physical and mental health of caregivers.

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Conflict of Interest

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