Cancer survivors face a unique set of psychosocial challenges during and after their recovery, including limited understanding from friends and family; a sense of loss when leaving the medical system; changes to their identity, and the fear of recurrence.

Physical activity has been shown to increase cancer survivors’ quality of life and has been recommended as a psychosocial support technique. Increased physical activity also appears to have a protective effect against cancer risk and has been associated with lower mortality rates from some cancers. However, research indicates that over half of cancer survivors do not meet recommended levels of physical activity, and that after short-term exercise interventions continued adherence is a challenge.

Aside from its exercise of choice, the Cancer Voices SA Cycling Team differs in other ways from many survivor exercise groups reported upon in the literature: it is ongoing, it is run by cancer survivors, it attracts a high proportion of males, and cancer experience is not a prerequisite for joining. Within this unique case, the following questions were therefore proposed:

1. What is the experience of cancer survivor members of the CSVSA Cycling Team; what features are valued and why?
2. What features of the CSVSA Cycling Team have potential to inform and benefit similar programs?

METHOD

Employing case study methodology, the Cancer Voices SA Cycling Team was observed operating in its natural context. Data sources were semi-structured interviews (N = 7), participant observation of two group rides (N = 15) and naturally-occurring data from team social media sites (123 posts). Through thematic content analysis, themes were resolved in each of the three data sources, and these were compared and reconciled to produce 14 descriptive themes. These were further analysed to develop two interpretive themes capturing the meanings and relationships between the descriptive themes.

RESULTS

Descriptive themes capturing patterns in data are summarised in Figure 1. Interpretive themes are discussed in the next column.

1. A unique combination of sport and support

The cycling team balances the advantages of a support group with the health benefits and enjoyment of a cycling team. This unique combination engages survivors who might avoid a regular support group (men for instance, and longer-term survivors) and those not motivated to join a regular cycling team. Involvement, benefits, and friendships can be maintained in the long term because membership is not restricted to cancer survivors, meaning that a support network is available if needed in future. Furthermore, the group enables both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping.

2. Survivorship on survivors’ own terms

Taking part in an activity with known health benefits allows cancer survivors to retain control over their health, and participation can continue indefinitely. An uncompromising approach to survivorship is enabled: members are to give and receive support on their own terms, while avoiding the negative connotations they may associate with cancer support groups. By participating, members are choosing to spend time in a diverse group in which having survived cancer is the norm rather than the exception. The visual demonstration of cycling in the CSVSA jersey is a personal affirmation of power and a rejection of the ‘patient’ identity. The challenge of cycling allows cancer survivors to prove to themselves and others that they have not stopped at simply surviving, but continue to aspire.

DISCUSSION

Shared understanding of the cancer experience was one of the most valued aspects of the group, and cycling team members particularly treasured friendships they had made based on shared experience, interests and outlook. Cancer survivors preferred the positive, health-focused setting that differentiated the cycling team from support groups, as well as the informal nature of emotional and informational support exchange (see Figure 2). Additionally, members valued being able to both improve and monitor their health by cycling.

Themes from other cancer survivor exercise groups in the literature such as the Chemo Club and dragon boat racing teams were supported. These groups also valued positivity, social support, friendship and the reference group of other survivors. New to this study was a focus on the advantages of the exercise group format over a support group format, the discussion of the meditative and health-monitoring benefits of exercise, and the unique combination of benefits that the cycling team offers.

IMPLICATIONS

Aspects of the way the CSVSA Cycling Team run may provide guidance to similar groups:

- Cycling: provided a means to engage males; became a means of problem-focused coping.
- Identifying as a cycling team avoided the negative perceptions some hold about support groups.
- The group catered for different ability levels.
- Social media were utilised to engage with members, even those not yet participating.
- That the group was formed and led by cancer survivors: normalised the cancer experience, enabled exchange of emotional and informational support.
- An open approach to membership meant: identifying as a ‘cancer survivor’ was not necessary.
- Benefits could be sustained on an ongoing basis.
- A support network was available if needed in future.

“Building Yourself to Better Cope: A Case Study of a Cycling Team Led by Cancer Survivors”

CLARE OAKES
JAKLIN ELLIOTT
CANCER VOICES SOUTH AUSTRALIA

“A case study of a cycling team led by cancer survivors demonstrates the potential of physical activity to meet the unique needs of cancer patients. This study highlights the importance of tailoring interventions to address the specific challenges faced by cancer survivors, and the opportunity for cycling groups to provide emotional, social, and health-related support.”

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