


Mindful gratitude journaling: psychological distress, quality of life and suffering in advanced cancer: a randomised controlled trial

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ABSTRACT

Context Numerous studies have shown that gratitude can reduce stress and improve quality of life.

Objective Our study aimed to examine the effect of mindful gratitude journaling on suffering, psychological distress and quality of life of patients with advanced cancer.

Methods We conducted a parallel-group, blinded, randomised controlled trial at the University of Malaya Medical Centre, Malaysia. Ninety-two adult patients with advanced cancer, and an overall suffering score $\geq 4/10$ based on the Suffering Pictogram were recruited and randomly assigned to either a mindful gratitude journaling group (N=49) or a routine journaling group (N=43).

Results After 1 week, there were significant reductions in the overall suffering score from the baseline in both the intervention group (mean difference in overall suffering score = -2.0, 95% CI = -2.7 to -1.4, $t = -6.125$, $p = 0.000$) and the control group (mean difference in overall suffering score = -1.6, 95% CI = -2.3 to -0.8, $t = -4.106$, $p = 0.037$). There were also significant improvements in the total Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale score (mean difference = -3.4, 95% CI = -5.3 to -1.5, $t = -3.525$, $p = 0.000$) and the total Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy-Spiritual Well-Being score (mean difference = 7.3, 95% CI = 1.5 to 13.1, $t = 2.460$, $p = 0.014$) in the intervention group after 7 days, but not in the control group.

Conclusion The results provide evidence that 7 days of mindful gratitude journaling could positively affect the state of suffering, psychological distress and quality of life of patients with advanced cancer.

Key messages

What was already known?

- ▶ Gratitude can reduce pain, stress, anxiety and depression.
- ▶ It correlates positively with quality of life.

What are the new findings?

- ▶ Mindful gratitude journaling reduces suffering in advanced cancer.
- ▶ It also improves quality of life.

What is their significance?

- ▶ Clinical: Mindful gratitude journaling can be useful in patients with advanced cancer.
- ▶ Research: The optimal duration of journaling remains unknown.

Trial registration number The trial was registered with the Australian and New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry (ACTRN1261800172191) and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

INTRODUCTION

Gratitude can be interpreted in many ways. It can be a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait or a coping response.¹ The term 'gratitude' is derived from Latin, *gratus*, which means thankful, or *gratia*, which means favour.² Emmons defined gratitude as an emotional response to a gift.³ In a broader sense, gratitude is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself and represents a general state of thankfulness and appreciation.⁴ Gratitude can be a state or a trait. While the