Experiencing COMFORT: A qualitative study of virtual non-pharmacologic consultations for adults with chronic pain using opioids

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INTRODUCTION

The rate of opioid overdose deaths continues to be an important public health concern, with more than 841,000 deaths since 1999 and 70% of drug overdose deaths involving an opioid in 2019¹. Chronic pain remains an avenue for exposure to long-term opioid use and its associated risks².

The COMFORT (Community-engaged Options to Maximize and Facilitate Opioid ReducTion) study was piloted by a community opioid task force in the Inland Northwest with two aims: to increase access to non-opioid, non-pharmacologic strategies for chronic pain management, and to increase use of these interventions. Limited by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the study offered multidimensional pain management sessions via telehealth including yoga, massage, chiropractic, and physical therapy.

At the conclusion of the six-week study, participants completed an exit interview using open-ended questions to assess their experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do adults with chronic pain describe their experience of participating in a virtual nonpharmacologic pain intervention?

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive analysis was conducted to describe experiences of adults prescribed opioids for chronic pain following six weeks of a virtual pain management intervention (N=15). Data was collected during an exit interview administered to participants who had completed all six sessions. A qualitative content analysis methodology with content analysis³ was used to analyze data.

SPOKANE REGIONAL TASK FORCE

RESULTS

A total of 15 of 16 participants completed a total of six weekly consultations with two therapies of their choice. Six main categories were identified to describe participants' experiences:

Struggling with Pain

It's debilitating and in every way, the chronic pain, takes the joy out of everything...Nothing you're good [at] anymore. It really is horrible to feel this way... it is so hard, it's so impossible to deal with in so many ways

External Influences on Pain

Benefits of learning new coping mechanisms

She provided some extra benefit just for my back, and also for my mental well being and health too. She provided some relaxation exercises so those were areat.

I use zoom every day...I've been doing this for almost a year. So zoom has been incorporated as part of my daily routine... So, this is not a new concept for me...The weak links in the chain are poor equipment or a poor connection...so the baseline is you have to have very good [equipment].

> Navigating a virtual environment

Changes in pain and medication use

...where you can see me on a typical day I was at a nine or a ten pain level...I think I'm getting closer to an eight.

I wanted to experience any modality it would help me with that situation. Because I did not as I do not now want to go up in...the opioids and I have worked really hard to reduce them down.

> Incentive to explore a new modality

POSTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The number of deaths due to opioid use continues to grow and solutions to aid in the treatment of chronic painful medical conditions are needed.
- Nonpharmacologic options such as yoga, massage, physical therapy and chiropractic therapies may offer another way to meet this need.
- Benefits of consultations included education on new pain relief techniques, stress management and improvement in pain
- Patients were receptive to virtual delivery of nonpharmacologic consultations for pain.

DISCUSSION

Main category findings included discussion of participants' ongoing struggles with pain and changes in pain and medication use, with participants indicating their pain did not change or improved. Some also indicated that their pain medication usage decreased. Most participants indicated that they learned new techniques for pain management, and several reported the new techniques were complimentary to their present coping strategies for pain. An important finding was the participants' openness to this novel intervention to improve their pain, which supports further development of virtual interventions to address unmet needs. Most participants indicated that spirituality was an important factor in their pain management strategy and future research could further explore this connection.

CONCLUSION

Participants were open and willing to explore new treatment modalities for addressing their unmet pain needs. Virtual sessions may be an important intervention to increase access to complementary and integrative health options.

REFERENCES

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[Spirituality] is the one thing that probably keeps me alive every day, because otherwise it would have been better just have ended it all four years ago.... that's what keeps you going you have that hope...that you'll get better and that you can continue on. Otherwise it's just, it really seems unbearable. Some days.

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