(P17) BENEFITS OF GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY FOR WOMEN
WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS
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Background: Problems with intimacy and sexual expression often occur among people with multiple sclerosis (MS). Existing literature suggests that few people who experience these problems report that they have been adequately addressed by their health-care providers, often because such sensitive topics can be difficult to discuss. Objectives: The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a wellness intervention with a component that focused on intimacy and sexuality on study participants’ perceived quality of intimate interpersonal relationships. Methods: A group of 108 women participated in the randomized clinical trial of the Wellness Program for Women with MS. Participants (mean age, 46.15 years) had been diagnosed a mean of 10.76 years previously. The majority were married (58.3%), and most (93.5%) had completed high school. The wellness intervention included an 8-week education/skill-building lifestyle-change program in a small group setting. One weekly session focused on intimacy and sexuality using multiple vignettes to allow participants to explore their experiences and feelings regarding intimacy, body image, self-esteem, and physical relationships. All participants completed a questionnaire at baseline and post-intervention that included measures of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral variables. Selected items from the Health Promoting Lifestyle Profile II were examined to determine whether there were significant differences in the intervention and control groups. The six-item “interpersonal intimacy scale” had an α of .812. Results: Scores were significantly associated with depressive symptoms (r = −0.48, P < .001) but not functional limitations (r = −0.16), age (r = −0.04), or education (r = 0.05). Repeated-measures analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant (F[1,106] = 5.053, P < .027) group-by-time interaction, with the intervention group showing improving scores on the scale and the control group showing a decrease in scores between pre- and post-intervention tests. Conclusions: These findings suggest that vignettes addressing issues relevant to sexuality within the context of living with MS may prompt discussions that improve patients’ perceptions of the quality of their interpersonal intimate relationships.

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