

“Essentially For You” Stress Management for Carers Project

Jenny Gilbert, Betty McGrory & Marjory Mackay
Strathcarron Hospice



Background

- The experience of caring for a family member with palliative care needs is often overwhelming and stressful and one which they feel ill prepared for (1).
- As a Complementary Therapy Service at Strathcarron Hospice we administer therapies to carers to help them cope with their anxieties but we have often identified carers who need more comprehensive stress management support.
- The Complementary Therapy Team was successful in their bid for a small grant from the National Carer Organisation to deliver and evaluate a training programme for patients' informal carers.

This case report aims to:

- To help the carer identify the effects of stress and give strategies to help improve their physical and emotional wellbeing.
- To develop their caring skills through the teaching of gentle massage (2), relaxation techniques and increase their knowledge in the context of advancing illness and death.
- To improve carers' ability to deal with changing relationships in their caring role.
- To increase carers' support through the development of informal network of carers.

Method

- The recruitment to the 4 week programme of 2 hourly sessions was done through the Community Nurse Specialists' (CNS) caseloads of 300 patients in total.
- Consideration was given to the fact that some patients would be in the last stage of life and a great deal of time was spent with the individual CNS identifying appropriate carers to send invitations to.
- Other clinical areas within the hospice were educated about the project and encouraged to identify carers who may benefit from attending the course.
- A personal invitation was sent to carers identified offering flexibility on the timing of the course e.g. day/weekend/evening, with provision for the carer to nominate a venue of their choice in their own locality. Sitting and transport service was also offered to allow the carer to attend. If no response from the carer was received within 2-3 weeks a follow up phone call was made.
- As part of our bid we proposed to work alongside other agencies offering carers support to palliative care patients who were not known to the hospice.

Results

Two hundred and thirty carers were sent personal invitations. Sixty-two carers (52 hospice patient carers and 10 Princess Royal Trust for Carers) started the training programme with 34 completing all 4 sessions, each programme consisted of 8-10 carers. In total 9 groups were held throughout 9 month period.

On the first day of the course carers were asked to write on post it notes what feelings they had in their role as a carer. The following is some of what carers felt and it confirms the need for stress management support for this group of people.

Anger Snappy Lethargic Jittery Can't Concentrate
Sense of Panic Anxious Frustration Sense of Loss
Tearful Alone Feeling Tense Emotional / Sad
Loss of Appetite Tiredness Lack of Sleep Bewildered
Feeling sick at times Resentment Heart Breaking
Tension Headaches Panicky

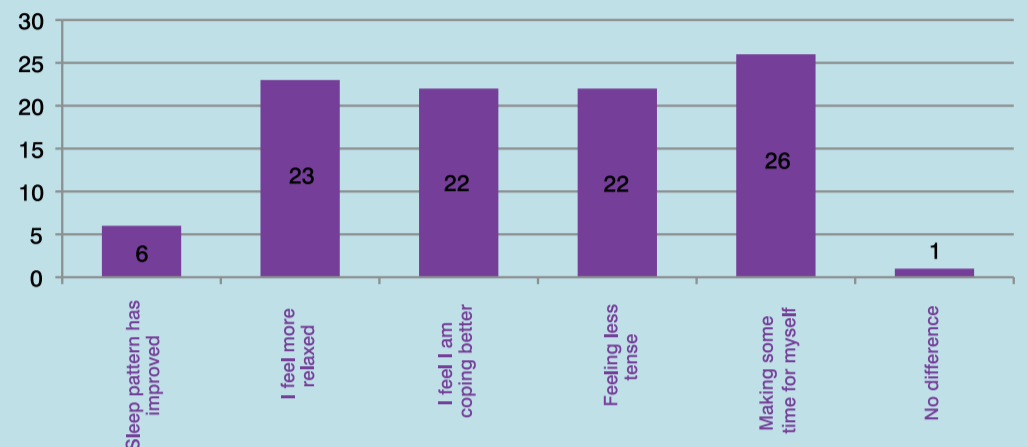
The carers who completed the four sessions evaluated the session through questioner and focus groups.

References:

- Forbat L, Haraldsdottir E, McManus E (2010) Evaluating family support needs of people using hospice services. Summary report of findings. Unpublished report funded by Stirling University, Cancer Care Research Centre and Strathcarron Hospice.
- Collinge W et al (2009) Touch, Caring and Cancer: Simple instruction for family and friends. Journal of the society for integrative oncology. Vol 7. No. 4.

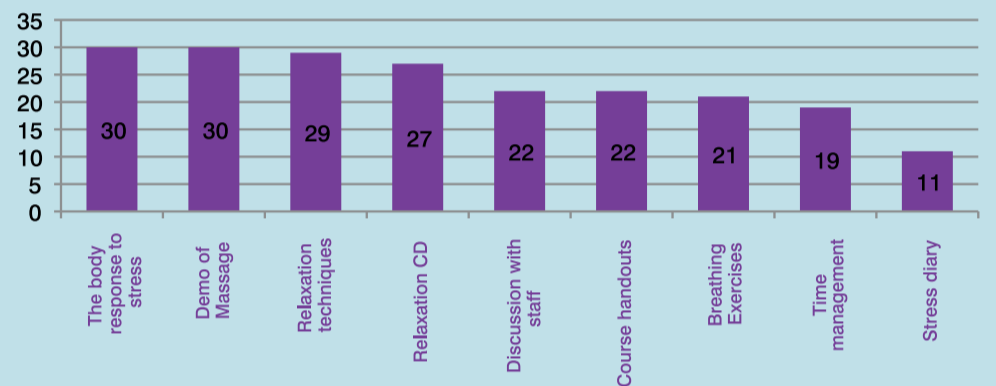
Impact of Course on Carers wellbeing

(Multiple answers given by 34 participants)



Helpful Course Content

(Multiple answers given by 34 participants)



When asked to comment on the most useful aspect of attending the course, overwhelmingly carers felt that the peer support they had experienced was invaluable:

“Sharing with others and talking feely in a group of carers and staff who understand.

With many commenting on the helpfulness of the education they had received regarding the effect of stress on their body and mind:

“It has helped me to realise what stress is doing to me health wise, and I can now manage my (limited) time in a better way so I feel less stressed all the time.

End of course Focus Group

Eighteen carers took part in a focus group after completing the course and the feedback was very positive about the lasting benefits of attending their individual course evident in the following thematic analysis.

“Gave me insight into the importance of maintaining the ‘person’ in the caring process.

It was felt that for future courses carers would benefit from advice on practical matters such as power of attorney and moving and handling issues. Positive comments were made about the structure of the course.

“Structure of the course was good, taking time for subject matter, then open discussion.

Overwhelming the majority of attendees felt there would be benefit if the course could run for a longer number of weeks.

Comments from Strathcarron Hospice CNS on the impact of the course on carers were positive and overall felt it was good to have a ‘joined up’ service for carers:

“Carers now able to recognise the signs of stress in themselves and have an understanding of how to deal with it.’ ‘This will help keep the patient at home.

Discussion

Overall a well received and beneficial project which has highlighted the need to provide this type of support to carers.

Recruitment was labour intensive which was underestimated on our bid for funding. It was surprising that, apart from carers who lived within the Callander area nobody else suggested meeting anywhere else other than the hospice.

Working alongside the Princess Royal Trust for Carers helped to extend our palliative care expertise to the carers of patients not generally cared for in the hospice and having the expertise of co-facilitation of the group helped to signpost carers to move onto groups offering support within their own geographical area.

Future courses will run with a similar format but will include suggestions made by the carers.