

Review Article

# Role of Green Exercises to Promote Well-Being in Terminally Ill Patients

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## ABSTRACT

Terminal illness is incurable disease which cannot be adequately treated and ultimately result into death within a short period of time. This term is more commonly used for progressive diseases such as cancer or heart disease. A patient who has such illness may be referred as terminal patient, terminally ill or terminal. Terminal illness includes various diseases such as, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), Cancer, and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) etc. Terminally ill patients go through stress and other psychological implications especially those patients who are at final stage of the illness. Studies have reported that they develop depression, anxiety and other mental disorders due to the illness. However they experience poor self-esteem and their overall functioning gets disturbed. To manage these difficulties green exercises can be beneficial. Green exercise refers to physical exercise undertaken in natural environments. Although physical exercises are well documented for physical and psychological health benefits green exercise also positively affects psychological and physical health and well-being. It includes diverse activities (e.g. walking, running, cycling, and swimming). Terminally ill patients can be benefitted more by including green exercise in their routine treatment. This can be helpful to treat psychological distress and other implications. It can be effective in enhancing self-esteem and well-being. This may help in fostering positivity which would improve the quality of life of terminally ill patients.

**Key words:** Green exercises, Mental health, Well-being, Terminal Illnesses.

## Green Exercise

Green exercise refers to physical exercise undertaken in natural environment. It includes diverse activities such as walking, running, cycling, swimming and so on. Green exercises can be practiced alone or in a group. It can be performed with the aim of enhancing well-being, or can be combined with other aims such as leisure, social contact, health promotion or environmental education. Maller et al. (2003) suggests that contact with natural places benefits individuals such as it:

- ✓ supports physical and mental health
- ✓ aids social and psychological development by providing outlets for risk-taking and physical energy

- ✓ reduces stress and anti-social behavior
- ✓ facilitates social interactions including team working and informal sociability
- ✓ provides visible and worthwhile achievements

Therefore it can be said that green exercises are very useful for overall health and development of the individuals. These exercises are easy to perform and can be done without supervision also. In various research studies it has been found to have great effect on physical health and mental health of the individuals as well.

## Mental Health and Well-being

Mental health and well-being both goes hand in hand. Mental health is a state

of well-being. It describes a level of psychological well-being, or an absence of mental disorder. It includes the way an individual feels about oneself, the quality of relationships and the ability to manage feelings and how the individual deals with the difficulties. Many researchers have attempted to define mental health and well-being. Few of the standardized definitions are mentioned below.

The **World Health Organization (WHO, 2001)** defines mental health as “*a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community*”.

According to **Naci and Ioannidis (2015)**, wellness refers to “*the diverse and interconnected dimensions of physical, mental, and social well-being that extend beyond the traditional definition of health. It includes choices and activities aimed at achieving physical vitality, mental alacrity, social satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and personal fulfillment.*”

Hence it is clear from the definitions that mental health is realizing own capabilities and coping with stress and working productively as well whereas mental health is a part of well-being and well-being includes overall physical, mental and social health. So if one has to have well-being then the individual needs to be physically, mentally and socially healthy.

**Carol Ryff** has developed a theory called Six-factor Model of Psychological Well-being (Dierendonck, et al., 2008). Six factors of this theory contribute to an individual's psychological well-being. These factors are as follows –

- Autonomy
- Environmental mastery
- Personal growth
- Positive relations with others
- Purpose in life
- Self-Acceptance

Autonomy and environmental mastery gives the sense of independence

and feeling of completeness to the individuals. It helps individuals to lead a happy life with good mental health. Personal positive growth also affects the mental health of the individual. Positive or good relationship with family and others are essential for positive personal growth and good mental health. Other than these factors purpose in life also plays an important role in the maintenance of mental health. Purposeless life brings a lot of psychological distress and other symptoms which disturbs mental health of the individual. Last but not the least sixth factor, self-acceptance, if the individual is not happy him himself then it causes psychological problems and affects mental health. In order to become happy one needs to be open and acceptable towards oneself. If the self-acceptance is high then there are high chances of happy life and good mental health. Generally psychological well-being of the individuals are measured through these six factors and there are standard psychological assessment tools are also available which are meant to assess psychological well-being.

### **Terminal Illness**

Terminal illness is incurable disease which cannot be adequately treated. Treatment options are available for these diseases but it ultimately results into death within a short period of time. Life span of the individual depends on the nature and severity of the illness. Patients with such illnesses are referred as terminal patient, terminally ill or terminal. This term is more commonly used for progressive diseases such as cancer, heart disease and so on.

Terminal illness includes various diseases such as, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), cancer, and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) etc. Terminal illness is progressive in nature and it causes more pain due to the nature and course of the illness. Usually in terminal illness individuals are in denial phase at the beginning and once they accept the illness it is quite late and then they are not able to handle the distress. Hence terminal illness is

found to cause psychological problems more than any other illness. Many a times there is co-morbidity with terminal illness which is undiagnosed and deteriorates the symptoms of the patients. Symptoms of terminal illness are so prominent that psychological symptoms are often ignored or unidentified by the health practitioners.

### **Mental Health Issues in Terminally Ill Patients**

Terminally ill patients go through a cycle of severe pain and various other problems which are usually physical problems. It has been found in various research studies that when the physical pain or other problems are beyond tolerance then the individuals are at high risk of the development of the psychological disturbances. Studies have also reported that the terminally ill patients have psychological co-morbidity (Block, S. D., 2000).

They may go through stress and other psychological implications especially those patients who are at final stage of the illness. Since their illness is not curable they might lose interest in life and willingness to live anymore. They go through a lot of negative emotions too. Studies have also reported that patients with terminal illness develop depression, anxiety and other mental disorders due to the illness. However they experience poor self-esteem and their overall functioning gets disturbed.

These psychological disturbances might contribute in the severity of the illness by deteriorating the symptoms and ultimately prognosis gets poor. It has been observed that terminally ill patients experience psychological and social problems both. Due to these disturbances their overall well-being is affected. Their self-esteem gradually goes down with the deterioration in symptoms. They may start staying alone most of the time and their interaction with others also decreases. They may lose interest in pleasurable activities which gradually leads to cut off from the family members and society. They get more engrossed into thoughts of illness and illness

itself which increases difficulty in maintaining psychological well-being.

### **Green Exercise with Terminally Ill Patients**

Positive effects of physical activity are widely documented, but recent researches on green exercises indicate that physical activity practiced in natural settings brings additional positive effects on human mind and body. Green exercises positively affect psychological and physical health and well-being (Gladwell, et al., 2013; and Pretty, J., Hine, R., & Peacock, J., 2006). Efficacy of green exercises for physical health has been reported in number of studies. They have been reported in few studies to be beneficial for mental health as well. Despite of various studies there is no single study reported in support of green exercises for patients with terminally illness. As terminal illness is progressive in nature and there is no cure for these illnesses so it causes psychological problems in many of the terminally ill patients. Many a times these co-morbid conditions are unidentified by the health practitioner. In order to deal with co-morbid psychological problems there should be a compulsory provision of mental status examination of terminally ill patients. Patients usually suffer from psychological distress, anxiety, depression (Block, S. D., 2000), suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, experience of negative emotions, loss of feeling of pleasure, pessimism, and avoiding others. Initially patients are in denial phase that they have developed terminal illness and gradually when acceptance comes they are at high risk of developing psychological problems. They gradually lose interest in people and life as well. Suicidal ideations are also found very frequently in them.

Exercises like walk on grass and breathing would help in managing stress and other psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression (Loureiro, A., & Veloso, S., 2017; Barton, J., & Pretty, J., 2010; and Pretty, J., Griffin, M., Sellens, M., & Pretty, C., 2003). Terminal illness with psychological problems disturbs

biological functioning of the individuals also. Green exercises are found to be beneficial for mood and biological functioning as well. It helps individuals to keep calm and relax which in turn helps to decrease anxiety and depression.

Another benefit of green exercise is it helps individuals to improve their social interaction if it is performed in group. When it is performed in public place or in group of terminally ill patients then it is more beneficial. Acceptance of illness and getting adjusted with the illness is more complicated for patients and it comes with multiple interactions with same patients. Hence, green exercise gives this opportunity to patients to interact and practice as well. Interactions with people having same kind of illness motivate patients and increases self-esteem also.

Patients are resistant to treatment because they think they are anyway going to die someday so they lose hope and motivation. For this green exercise help them to bring some interest in life and motivate them for treatment. Due to illness they find their life to be worthless and they find themselves hopeless. All these issues are handled when patients meet different people around them who bring positivity. Hence, green exercise was supposed to be helpful because it was performed in natural environment which releases distress. When the patients are stress free then they can motivate themselves for treatment and for living a good life.

## CONCLUSION

Terminal illness is progressive in nature and as it progresses individuals experience more and more problems related to mental health and well-being. It has also been seen in various studies that terminal illness has co-morbid psychological conditions. They may experience psychological distress and other psychological conditions. They may not turn up for direct psychiatric consultation or psychotherapy sessions due to stigma attach to mental illness. Green exercises have been

found effective for physical and mental health as well so in this paper author has tried to bring attention on possible use of green exercises to enhance well-being of terminally ill patients. So here the author attempts to put forward the advantages of green exercises performed by terminally ill patients in order to manage psychological issues. Moreover it can be said that green exercises would be helpful for patients with terminal illness in improving various dimensions of mental health and well-being. In future empirical studies can be carried out to establish the efficacy of green exercises to enhance well-being of terminally ill patients.

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