

"If I was just with a normal cycling group then [cancer is] sort of something you keep to yourself. No one wants to know about it. But here, if you've got something to say, or someone has something to say, you listen, or they listen to you."

BUILDING YOURSELF TO BETTER COPE

A CASE STUDY OF A CYCLING TEAM LED BY CANCER SURVIVORS

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Cancer survivors face a unique set of psychosocial challenges during and after their recovery, including limited understanding from friends and family¹, a sense of loss when leaving the medical system², changes to their identity, and the fear of recurrence³.

Physical activity has been shown to increase cancer survivors' quality of life⁴ and has been recommended as a psychosocial support technique⁵. Increased physical activity also appears to have a protective effect against cancer risk⁶ and has been associated with lower mortality rates from some cancers⁷. However, research indicates that over half of cancer survivors do not meet recommended levels of physical activity⁸, and that after short-term exercise interventions continued adherence is a challenge⁹.

Aside from its exercise of choice, the Cancer Voices SA Cycling Team differs in other ways from many survivor exercise groups reported upon in the literature: it is ongoing, it is run by cancer survivors, it attracts a high proportion of males, and cancer experience is not a prerequisite for joining. Within this unique case, the following questions were therefore proposed:

- » What is the experience of cancer survivor members of the CVSA Cycling Team; what features are valued and why?
- » What features of the CVSA Cycling Team have potential to inform and benefit similar programs?

METHOD

Employing case study methodology, the Cancer Voices SA Cycling Team was observed operating in its natural context. Data sources were semi-structured interviews (N = 7), participant

1. A unique combination of sport and support

The cycling team balances the advantages of a support group with the health benefits and enjoyment of a cycling team. This unique combination engages survivors who might avoid a regular support group (men for instance, and longer-term survivors) and those not motivated to join a regular cycling team. Involvement, benefits, and friendships can be maintained in the long term because membership is not restricted to cancer survivors, meaning that a support network is available if needed in future. Furthermore, the group enables both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping.

2. Survivorship on survivors' own terms

Taking part in an activity with known health benefits allows cancer survivors to regain control over their health, and participation can continue indefinitely. An uncompromising approach to survivorship is enabled: members are to give and receive support on their own terms, while avoiding the negative connotations they may associate with cancer support groups. By participating, members are choosing to spend time in a diverse group in which having survived cancer is the norm rather than the exception. The visual demonstration of cycling in the CVSA jersey is a personal affirmation of power and a rejection of the 'patient' identity. The challenge of cycling allows cancer survivors to prove to themselves and others that they have not stopped at simply surviving, but continue to aspire.

DISCUSSION

Shared understanding of the cancer experience was one of the most valued aspects of the group, and cycling team members particularly treasured friendships they had made based on shared experience, interests and outlook. Cancer survivors preferred the positive, health-focused setting that differentiated the cycling team from support groups, as well as the informal nature of emotional and informational support exchange (see Figure 2). Additionally, members valued being able to both improve and monitor their health by cycling.

Themes from other cancer survivor exercise groups in the literature such as the Chemo Club¹² and dragon boat racing teams¹³ were supported. These groups also valued positivity, social support, friendship and the reference group of other survivors. New to this study was a focus on the advantages of the exercise group format over a support group format, the discussion of the meditative and health-monitoring benefits of exercise, and the unique combination of benefits that the cycling team offers.

RESULTS

Descriptive themes capturing patterns in data are summarised in Figure 1. Interpretive themes are discussed in the next column.

Medium-paced cycling is an example of the moderate-intensity exercise Australians are recommended to engage in for 30 minutes on most days¹⁰. Cycling has been recommended to cancer survivors due to its low-impact nature, usage of all major muscle groups, easiness, and adaptability to any desired intensity level¹¹.

Participant observation video stills. Figure 2 (left): Survivors and supporters plan the route together before a Sunday group ride. Figure 3 (right): While cycling, two riders discuss a member's recent cancer recurrence.



"The sort of motivation that brings people to our Cancer Voices SA Cycling Team is that desire to get your life back, and to actually go back to being what you were, or better than what you were."

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