

Review

A Ray of Hope Amidst the Gloom: The Journey of Psychological

Healing for Cancer Patients Through Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract:

As medical research advances, clinical oncology treatments continue to improve; however, psychological issues among cancer patients remain a significant challenge. This paper focuses on the psychological conditions of patients with malignant tumors and explores the application of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in psychological care. Cancer patients often experience emotions such as irritability, anxiety, depression, and fear, which can severely impact their treatment adherence and quality of life. Currently, there is insufficient attention to the psychological health of cancer patients within the healthcare system in China, leading to difficulties in the timely identification and intervention of psychological issues. TCM has demonstrated unique advantages in the psychological care of cancer patients. In recent years, Chinese oncology departments have introduced a series of TCM-based psychological care methods that emphasize medical humanism. Studies have shown that combining TCM treatment with psychological intervention significantly improves the psychological state of cancer patients, enhances their quality of life, and strengthens immune function, thereby improving treatment outcomes.

Keywords: Malignant Tumors; Psychological Intervention; Traditional Chinese Medicine; Cancer Rehabilitation

1. Introduction

Malignant tumors represent a significant public health challenge worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates for 2019, malignant tumors are the leading or second leading cause of death in 112 countries and regions (1). In the 2019 Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD2019), which examined 22 categories of diseases and injuries, malignant tumors ranked second only to cardiovascular diseases in terms of global mortality, years of life lost (YLL), and disability-adjusted life years (DALY) (2). The economic burden of malignant tumors also places substantial pressure on patients, families, and society (3). The development of tumor diseases is the result of a complex interplay of multiple factors. First, organisms are vulnerable to attacks both prenatally and postnatally, with susceptibility influencing the individual's ability to resist tumor diseases. Additionally, tumor development is closely linked to the evolution of human lifespan (4). Therefore, malignancies not only severely impact human health and quality of life but have also remained a focal point of medical research due to the historically suboptimal treatment outcomes. This challenge persists for healthcare professionals globally. However, recent advancements in medical research and technology have deepened the understanding of tumor diseases. Significant progress has been made in both basic and clinical research, leading to continuous improvements in clinical oncology treatment strategies and capabilities. Today, clinicians have an expanding array of selective tumor treatment methods and technologies, and the conceptual approach and models for cancer diagnosis and treatment have undergone significant transformation (5).

Malignant tumors are severe diseases that not only threaten patients' physical health but are also frequently accompanied by significant psychological issues. According to relevant studies (6), patients with malignant tumors often experience a suboptimal state of health throughout the course of the disease. By the time they develop noticeable symptoms, most patients are already at an advanced stage, which increases their susceptibility to negative emotional states. Research indicates that patients with advanced tumors often exhibit emotions such as irritability, anxiety, depression, and fear, which can directly impact their adherence to and tolerance of treatment. In China, the psychological well-being of cancer patients is often inadequately addressed in medical care (7). This is primarily due to the high workload of healthcare professionals, leaving them with insufficient time to understand the emotional state of patients. Furthermore, most healthcare providers have not received specialized training in psychological counseling and treatment, resulting in a lack of confidence in performing psychological assessments. Additionally, due to the cultural stigma surrounding illness in Chinese society, many patients are reluctant to openly express their psychological concerns (8). According to a study by the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) (9), cancer patients may face a range of psychological issues, collectively referred to as cancer-related psychological distress. These psychological issues severely affect patients' treatment adherence, outcomes, and quality of life. A psychological distress assessment conducted among malignant tumor patients revealed that, prior to treatment, 85.2% of patients experienced severe

psychological distress, while 73.43% had moderate to severe distress; even after treatment, the proportion of patients with severe psychological distress remained as high as 56.3% (10).

Patients with malignant tumors often experience significant psychological issues. Integrating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) techniques with psychological interventions may offer substantial benefits. Studies have shown that combining TCM techniques with psychological interventions in malignant tumor patients can significantly improve negative emotions, reduce psychological stress, and enhance quality of life (11). Additionally, such interventions can help strengthen the immune system and exhibit inhibitory effects on malignancies, potentially improving the overall treatment outcomes (12). In the process of cancer treatment, the patient's TCM constitution type plays a role in the development of psychological issues. Research suggests that special attention should be given to patients with tumor-related psychological problems who exhibit specific TCM constitution types associated with higher incidences of psychological distress. Psychological screening should be conducted for these patients, followed by a detailed analysis of the related issues. Based on these findings, a comprehensive treatment model that integrates constitution, psychology, and professional care—referred to as the "three-in-one" approach—should be established. This model allows for the development of individualized treatment plans, as well as tailored dietary and lifestyle recommendations, to achieve optimal therapeutic results (13).

Since ancient times, traditional Chinese medicine has documented and described tumors extensively. Even today, Chinese medicine retains a unique role in the treatment of modern cancers. Traditional Chinese oncology emphasizes the dominant role of "internal factors" in disease development, with emotional disturbances (the "seven emotions") considered a significant etiological factor in tumor formation. Treatment approaches generally focus on harmonizing the body and mind, incorporating emotional regulation, external therapies, and herbal remedies to provide psychological support for cancer patients (14). Currently, a significant number of specialized Chinese medicine oncology centers have been established across China, particularly in tier-one cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. These centers, located in top-tier hospitals, including tertiary traditional Chinese medicine hospitals, general hospitals, and specialized institutions, offer services such as acupuncture, physical therapy, and rehabilitation. Additionally, cancer rehabilitation clubs have been formed to provide comprehensive support for patients. Furthermore, a series of oncology psychological care methods with distinct Chinese medical features, grounded in medical humanism, have been developed to better address the psychological needs of cancer patients (15).

Traditional Chinese oncology emphasizes the dominant role of internal factors in disease development, employing methods such as emotional regulation, external therapies, and herbal remedies as part of psychological care for cancer patients. Additionally, specialized Chinese medicine oncology centers and cancer rehabilitation clubs have been established in developed regions of China, providing comprehensive rehabilitation support for cancer patients, while also advancing oncology

psychological care methods with distinct Chinese medical features.

According to the 2020 report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the incidence and mortality rates of malignant tumors continue to rise globally, posing a persistent public health challenge that is shared worldwide (16). However, there remain significant gaps in cancer-related psychological care. At present, only a few hospitals have established cancer psychology services, and these are typically limited to hospitalized cancer patients, neglecting broader efforts such as psychological health education for the general public, psychological counseling for families, and psychological rehabilitation and follow-up care for cancer survivors. Furthermore, objective data on cancer-related psychological conditions are scarce (17). In 2017, the National Health Commission, along with 22 other departments, issued the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Mental Health Services," which emphasized the importance of integrating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) into mental health services, enhancing the development of relevant departments in TCM hospitals, and promoting the advancement of Chinese psychology (18). Research by Chen et al. has shown that adjunctive psychological therapy can lead to improved physical and mental well-being, including reducing the side effects of cancer treatment, alleviating physical discomfort, and decreasing symptoms of anxiety and depression (19). Overall, while some progress has been made in the area of cancer-related psychological care, significant issues remain, including insufficient public education on psychological health, a lack of objective psychological data, and limited coverage of psychological services in healthcare institutions.

2. Objective

This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the research findings and limitations regarding cancer-related psychological work both domestically and internationally, in order to identify the existing issues and challenges within the field of cancer psychological health services. Additionally, by reviewing and summarizing relevant studies, the paper seeks to propose key directions for future research, with the goal of providing reference and guidance for the improvement of cancer psychological health services.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a literature review approach, which involves searching, selecting, and analyzing relevant literature to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research findings and limitations regarding cancer psychological health services both domestically and internationally. The literature search primarily utilized the following methods:

3.1. Academic Databases

The literature search was conducted using internationally recognized academic databases, including PubMed, Web of Science, and Embase, as well as domestic databases such as CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and Wanfang. Keywords were used to conduct searches and select relevant literature.

3.2. Search Strategy

A combination of keywords, including "cancer psychological health services," "cancer psychological interventions," "cancer psychological rehabilitation," "cancer

psychological assessments," and "cancer psychological treatment," was used to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the search results.

3.3. Literature Selection

Based on the title, abstract, and keywords, an initial screening was conducted to identify literature related to cancer psychological health services. Full-text reviews were then performed to further refine the selection, excluding studies that were either irrelevant to the topic or lacked sufficient information.

3.4. Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected literature was extracted and analyzed to summarize the findings and limitations of related research both domestically and internationally. The main discoveries and conclusions were synthesized, and recommendations for addressing existing issues were proposed.

4. Results

4.1 Traditional Chinese Medicine's Understanding of Cancer and Its Psychological Impact

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) offers a unique perspective on cancer and its psychological impacts. In TCM, cancer and its psychological effects are classified as Yu Zheng (Depression Syndrome), which is closely related to the emotional disturbances identified in the Seven Emotions (anger, worry, overthinking, sadness, and fear) as pathogenic factors in TCM theory. Studies have shown that cancer patients typically experience varying degrees of sadness, irritability, and withdrawal prior to diagnosis. These emotional changes often intensify during the onset, treatment, or progression of cancer (27). Therefore, emotional factors play a crucial role in TCM's understanding of cancer etiology. Research further indicates that patients with Liver Qi Stagnation and Phlegm Stasis and Deficiency of Vital Qi with Toxic Heat patterns are more likely to experience higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, with a greater prevalence compared to the general population of breast cancer patients (28). Objective diagnostic parameters such as facial color and tongue appearance, as assessed through TCM's four diagnostic methods, reveal that malignancy-related depression and anxiety primarily manifest as Qi and Blood Deficiency and Blood Stasis with Damp-Heat (29). With respect to insomnia caused by depression and anxiety in cancer patients, TCM categorizes this as Insomnia and Unsettled Sleep disorders, further classified based on the cancer's pathophysiology into patterns such as Heart-Spleen Deficiency, Gallbladder Qi Stagnation with Phlegm Obstruction, Yin Deficiency with Excess Heat, and Heart-Kidney Disharmony (30).

4.2 Principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the Treatment of Tumors and Psychological Issues

The basic principles of TCM in the treatment of tumors and their associated psychological issues can be summarized in several key aspects: holistic approach, syndrome differentiation and treatment, emphasis on emotional factors, and personalized care. Firstly, the fundamental principles of TCM in anti-tumor therapy are the holistic approach and syndrome differentiation. TCM views the human body as an interconnected whole, where the development and progression of tumors result from multiple factors interacting together. Thus, treatment should adopt a holistic

strategy, addressing not only the physical, but also the psychological and social aspects of the patient. This approach aims to enhance the body's innate immunity and prevent recurrence or metastasis. During the treatment process, syndrome differentiation is essential, requiring tailored interventions based on the patient's specific condition to achieve the best therapeutic outcomes (32). Secondly, TCM places significant importance on the role of psychological factors in disease development and treatment. Emotional factors are considered key pathogenic elements, and the treatment approach prioritizes the patient's subjective experiences and self-reported symptoms. Special attention is given to emotional regulation and stress relief. As cancer patients often suffer from psychological issues such as depression and anxiety, TCM practitioners develop treatment plans based on different syndromes, aiming to alleviate emotional distress and support physical health (33). Finally, TCM nursing emphasizes personalized care, rooted in traditional diagnostic principles of syndrome differentiation. This approach offers strong advantages, including high patient acceptance and cooperation. TCM nursing not only focuses on treatment but also integrates disease prevention and health education. Through methods such as herbal decoctions, acupuncture, and massage, TCM can improve the patient's condition and enhance immune function, while also providing psychological support and guidance to help patients maintain a positive mindset and cope with the disease (34).

4.3. Application of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in Psychological Improvement of Cancer Patients

4.3.1. Herbal Treatment

Herbal treatment plays a significant role in the psychological improvement of cancer patients. TCM centers its approach on syndrome differentiation and treatment, establishing a comprehensive treatment system for cancer that incorporates medication, external therapies, medicinal diets, music therapy, psychological counseling, and TCM-based physical exercises. This multifaceted approach, referred to as "combined treatment," aims to address "multiple targets and dimensions" of therapy (35-36). Treatment is tailored based on the specific syndrome type of each patient. For patients with liver qi stagnation and spleen deficiency, TCM commonly employs strategies to soothe the liver and relieve stagnation, while strengthening the spleen and tonifying qi. Common prescriptions include Bupleurum Powder to Spread the Liver, Xiaoyao San, Four Reversal Powder, Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Decoction, Phlegm-Transforming Decoction, with modifications as needed. For patients with both heart and spleen deficiency, the focus is on tonifying qi and calming the mind, with formulas such as Licorice, Wheat, and Jujube Decoction, Lily and Rehmannia Decoction, Sour Jujube Seed Decoction, Ginseng and Longan Decoction (37). Clinical practice has shown that formulas like Ban Xia Hou Po Tang and Chai Hu Gui Zhi Tang can also be effective in treating depression (38), providing an auxiliary means of psychological support for cancer patients. When treating cancer patients, Professor Yin Dongfeng advocates for a treatment approach that not only "supports the body's vital energy and fights cancer" but also "regulates the flow of qi." Many of his formulas emphasize the regulation of qi, such as Bupleurum, Dragon

Bone, and Oyster Shell Decoction (39). This method not only supports anti-cancer treatment but also helps balance the patient's emotional fluctuations, contributing to psychological improvement. Herbal treatment plays a crucial role in the psychological well-being of cancer patients and offers valuable clinical insights and evidence for practice.

4.3.2. Acupuncture Treatment

Acupuncture, as a traditional Chinese medicine therapy, plays a significant role in the psychological regulation of cancer patients. It has been shown to facilitate the smooth flow of meridians, regulate qi and blood, and modulate immune function, thereby effectively alleviating depressive symptoms in cancer patients (40). In clinical practice, acupuncture for cancer pain typically focuses on the Hegu and Taichong acupoints. These two points, when used together, help invigorate qi and activate blood circulation, thus relieving pain. Additionally, acupuncture is employed to mitigate the side effects of radiotherapy and chemotherapy, with key acupoints including Dazhui, Zusanli, and Sanyinjiao. These points help to promote yang energy, clear heat, dispel fatigue, strengthen the spleen, tonify qi, and expel dampness (41). Acupuncture has not only psychological effects but also influences immune function. Clinical studies have shown that acupuncture can increase serum levels of INF- γ and TNF, improve T cell subpopulations and NK cell activity, and enhance the patient's immune system (42). Further research indicates that acupuncture combined with moxibustion is more effective than antidepressant medication in treating advanced-stage cancer-related depression (CRD) in patients. Acupuncture points used include Neiguan, Shenmen, Yifeng, Baihui, Sishencong, Hegu, and Taichong, with moxibustion applied to Guanyuan and Zusanli (43). Moreover, acupuncture at the back-shu points, which target qi and blood deficiency, has been found to effectively alleviate depressive symptoms (44). In summary, acupuncture plays a positive role in the psychological management of cancer patients. It not only helps improve depressive mood but also supports immune function and alleviates the side effects of cancer treatment, providing a safe and effective adjunctive therapeutic option.

4.3.3 Qigong and Massage

Qigong and massage, as traditional Chinese medicine therapies, play a positive role in the psychological regulation of cancer patients. Guolin New Qigong emphasizes the integration of traditional Chinese medicine, Western medicine, and Qigong practices. The exercise involves performing one or two Qigong techniques, each lasting 20 to 30 minutes, typically while walking. These exercises are combined with visualization of positive imagery (intentions), arm movements, and deep breathing, which facilitates the integration of physical movement, mental focus, and respiration through the expulsion of stale air and inhalation of fresh energy (45). A clinical study involving 39 cancer patients practicing Qigong found that 94.87% of participants reported improved mood, a sense of physical relaxation, and enhanced confidence in their ability to combat the disease (46). This suggests that Qigong practice has a positive impact on the psychological well-being of cancer patients. Additionally, acupoint-based massage combined with psychological interventions has been shown to significantly improve sleep disturbances in cancer patients undergoing

chemotherapy. This method is simple to perform, carries no side effects, and is highly accepted by patients (47). These findings suggest that massage therapy holds potential benefits in the psychological management of cancer patients.

4.4. The Contribution of Traditional Chinese Medicine to the Restoration of Social Function in Patients

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) plays a significant role in promoting the restoration of social function in patients. An example of this is the combination of pinet needle therapy and modified Xiao Yao San decoction for the treatment of liver qi stagnation-related depression in breast cancer patients. Studies show that this treatment regimen not only significantly improves the efficacy of treatment but also effectively alleviates symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as improves overall quality of life (48). Among outpatient breast cancer patients with depression, the proportion of those with depressive disorders decreased to 56.6%, with notable improvement in mild depressive symptoms (49). Moreover, research indicates that the combination of Ban Xia Hou Po Tang (Pinellia and Magnolia Decoction) with Western medication has an efficacy rate of 94.5% and a cure rate of 55.2%, which is significantly higher than the 81.1% efficacy rate and 22.9% cure rate seen with Western medication alone for treating depression (50). These findings suggest that TCM has substantial potential in improving patients' mental health and plays an active role in the recovery of their social functions. Through acupuncture and herbal treatments, patients experience significant reductions in depressive symptoms, leading to improvements in quality of life. This, in turn, helps patients reintegrate into social life and restore normal social functions. Such treatments provide valuable support for patient rehabilitation and social function recovery, holding important clinical significance and promising application potential.

4.5. The Practice and Challenges of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Improving the Psychological Well-being of Cancer Patients

Recent clinical studies have demonstrated the significant effects of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in improving the psychological well-being of cancer patients. Liu Dan et al. (51) found that the combination of percutaneous needling and modified Xiao Yao San decoction effectively treated depression associated with liver qi stagnation in breast cancer patients. Within just 4 weeks, the treatment group exhibited a response rate of 96.88%, significantly higher than the 45.71% seen in the control group ($P < 0.01$). This TCM combination therapy not only enhanced treatment efficacy but also effectively alleviated patients' anxiety, depressive symptoms, and improved their quality of life. The study further revealed that, compared to single-agent Western medicine treatments, this combined TCM approach lowered the levels of VEGF and NGF in patients, reducing the likelihood of breast cancer recurrence and metastasis. It was also associated with high safety, suggesting its potential for broader clinical application. Additionally, the use of Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li Decoction combined with Five-Element Music Therapy for post-cancer depression patients showed promising clinical outcomes. Results indicated significant improvements in HAMD-24 and QLQ-C30 scores following treatment (52), with marked reductions in depressive symptoms and enhanced quality of life. Guo Lin's

Qigong therapy advocates for a three-pronged approach, integrating TCM, Western medicine, and Qigong to treat cancer, emphasizing TCM's unique role in mental health management. Research suggests that long-term Qigong practice combined with TCM decoctions can reduce negative emotions and improve quality of life, particularly for patients in the advanced stages of cancer, with significant therapeutic benefits (53). Clinically, integrative approaches that combine herbal formulas, acupuncture, and TCM psychological therapies with Western treatments have been shown to markedly improve both the psychological and physical conditions of patients. This revision refines the language for academic clarity, improves readability, and maintains the original meaning and reference citations. It also clarifies the research findings and enhances the flow of information.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as a form of traditional medicine, offers unique advantages in the treatment of diseases, such as diverse therapeutic methods, low recurrence rates, and minimal side effects, resulting in significant clinical outcomes. However, when it comes to improving the psychological well-being of cancer patients, TCM faces several challenges. First, there is a lack of consensus among TCM scholars regarding the pathogenesis of malignancy-associated depression, and the therapeutic framework remains in the research phase, with no unified theoretical foundation. In addition, most clinical studies on TCM treatments have small sample sizes and limited research frequency, leading to a lack of long-term follow-up data to assess the persistence and comprehensiveness of therapeutic effects. Furthermore, much of the existing TCM research focuses on the compilation and interpretation of ancient medical cases, and there remains a gap in addressing the psychological needs of cancer patients. This highlights the need for deeper exploration in modern clinical studies. Finally, the design of clinical trials in TCM research, including sample size and methodology, remains inadequate. The absence of large-scale research data limits the ability to draw robust conclusions, emphasizing the need for further improvements and strengthening in these areas.

5. Conclusions

Malignant tumors pose a significant threat to human health and life worldwide, often accompanied by substantial psychological issues. Patients commonly experience negative emotional states such as irritability, anxiety, depression, and fear. These psychological challenges not only impair treatment adherence and tolerance but also further reduce quality of life. However, the current healthcare system places insufficient emphasis on the mental health of cancer patients, resulting in a failure to address this issue in a timely and effective manner.

In the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), significant advantages have been observed when integrating appropriate TCM techniques with psychological interventions to improve the mental health of cancer patients. TCM oncology emphasizes the central role of "internal factors" in disease development. By utilizing various approaches, such as emotional regulation, external therapies, and medicinal diets, TCM effectively alleviates negative emotions, reduces psychological stress, and enhances patients' quality of life. Furthermore, TCM adheres to the principle of mind-body harmony, and through the regulation of patients' overall health, it further

strengthens their ability to resist malignant tumors.

In the future, it is recommended to strengthen research on the application of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in improving the psychological well-being of cancer patients, with a focus on exploring the optimal integration of TCM techniques and psychological interventions. At the same time, the healthcare system should place greater emphasis on the mental health of cancer patients and enhance professional training for medical staff to improve their ability to recognize and address psychological issues. Additionally, community outreach should be intensified to raise public awareness of the psychological challenges faced by cancer patients, encouraging individuals to actively seek psychological support. This will help foster a supportive network for the mental health of cancer patients. Through these efforts, we aim to provide more comprehensive and effective psychological support for cancer patients, helping them better cope with the challenges posed by the disease.

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