



Original Article

Journaling as reinforcement for the resourcefulness training intervention in mothers of technology-dependent children



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ABSTRACT

Resourcefulness, a set of cognitive and behavioral skills used to attain, maintain, or regain health, is a factor related to depressive symptoms in mothers of children with chronic conditions and complex care needs who are dependent on medical technology such as mechanical ventilation or feeding tubes. The purpose of this secondary analysis of a randomized, controlled pilot intervention study was to determine the feasibility, acceptability and fidelity of daily journal writing as a method of reinforcement of resourcefulness training (RT) that teaches the use of social and personal resourcefulness skills. Participants returned their journals to the study office at the end of the four-week journaling exercise. Content analysis from exit interviews and journals supported the feasibility, acceptability and fidelity of daily journaling for reinforcement of RT in this population. Journal writing can be used by pediatric nurses to reinforce and promote resourcefulness skill use in parents of technology-dependent children.

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1. Introduction

Technology-dependent children are children with chronic conditions and complex care needs who are supported by lifesaving, medical technology such as mechanical ventilation, feeding tubes, or supplemental oxygen (Spratling, 2015). Mothers are typically the primary caregivers for these children (Toly, Musil, & Carl, 2012a). Previous descriptive research found that 40% of the mothers caring for technology-dependent children are at high risk for clinical depression (Toly, Musil, & Carl, 2012b; Toly et al., 2012a). Furthermore, mothers of technology-dependent children who were younger, un-partnered, and with lower normalization and personal resourcefulness had more depressive symptoms (Toly & Musil, 2015).

Resourcefulness is a factor related to depressive symptoms in mothers of technology-dependent children that is amenable to change (Toly & Musil, 2015). Resourcefulness is an acquired set of cognitive and behavioral skills that are used to attain, maintain, or regain health (Zauszniewski, 2012). Resourcefulness encompasses both social and personal resourcefulness as key aspects (Zauszniewski, 2012). Personal resourcefulness includes self-help skills such as organizing daily activities, using positive self-talk, reframing the situation positively, changing

from usual reaction and exploring new ideas. Social resourcefulness skills include help-seeking skills such as relying on family and friends, exchanging ideas with others and seeking help from professionals or experts (Zauszniewski, 2012). An individual's resourcefulness level can change over time due to the influence of life events or can be taught using the resourcefulness training intervention (RT) (Zauszniewski, Eggenschwiler, Preechawong, Roberts, & Morris, 2006; Zauszniewski, Musil, Burant, & Au, 2014).

RT consists of an in-person training session where eight social and personal resourcefulness skills are taught (Toly, Musil, & Zauszniewski, 2014; Zauszniewski, Musil, Burant, & Au, 2014; Zauszniewski et al., 2006). The optimal method for facilitating learning of social and personal resourcefulness skills is practice and reinforcement—one approach is the use of expressive writing (Klein & Boals, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997; Richards, 2003). In addition to facilitating and reinforcing learning, expressive writing has been found effective in reducing stress and negative emotions and improving and promoting mental and physical health (Buda, 2002; Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002; Smyth & Helm, 2003). The journaling used within RT is considered a form of expressive writing. Prior studies have used journal writing in RT to help individuals receiving the intervention to process negative emotions and stress (Zauszniewski, Musil, & Au, 2013; Zauszniewski, Musil, Burant and Au, 2014; Zauszniewski, Musil, Burant, Standing and Au, 2014; Zauszniewski et al., 2006), to facilitate and reinforce learning of resourcefulness skills, and to apply resourcefulness skills to stressful events (Toly et al., 2014; Zauszniewski & Musil, 2014). Journaling was a successful strategy for reinforcing the RT intervention material and effective in reducing stress and depressive symptoms, decreasing

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negative emotions and depressive cognitions, and improving mental health (Toly et al., 2014; Zauszniewski et al., 2013).

1.1. Study purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility, acceptability and fidelity of journaling as a method of reinforcement of the RT intervention (social and personal resourcefulness skills) among mothers of children with chronic conditions and complex care needs who are dependent on medical technology.

2. Methods

2.1. Design and sample

This study was a secondary analysis of a randomized, controlled pilot intervention study in which RT journaling instruction was delivered. A convenience sample of 22 mothers caring for children <18 years of age at home who were dependent on medical technology based on the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA, 1987) group classification system was obtained. OTA groups are defined as follows: group 1 mechanical ventilation, group 2 intravenous nutrition/medication, and group 3 respiratory/nutritional support. The participants were randomly assigned to either the RT intervention group (RT with journaling) (n = 13) or the comparison group (journaling only) (n = 9). IRB approval was obtained from a large children's hospital in the midwest. The procedures for screening and recruitment are described elsewhere (Section 2.4.1 of Toly et al., 2014).

2.2. Procedures

The primary researcher used a systematic procedure to train the intervention nurse (a registered nurse specializing in pediatric nursing) and monitor standardized administration of the RT intervention. Examples of each resourcefulness skill and intervention delivery instructions were given to the intervention nurse. The intervention nurse observed the researcher deliver the intervention to two participants. Then, the researcher observed the intervention nurse deliver the intervention according to written protocol before approval of delivery of the intervention to participants.

RT was delivered by the intervention nurse in a face-to-face session lasting approximately 50 minutes in a private location chosen by the participant. The intervention included teaching three social resourcefulness skills (help seeking) and five personal resourcefulness skills (self-help), four weeks of journal writing on the application of resourcefulness skills in their daily life for reinforcement, and weekly phone calls from the intervention nurse for four weeks. The acronym "RESOURCE" is used to assist with recall of resourcefulness skills. Participants in the intervention group were given a wallet-sized card listing the resourcefulness skills to keep in their journal and a magnet for their refrigerator. They were instructed to review their card and describe specific examples of resourcefulness skill application when caring for their child in their daily journal entries to reinforce RT. The following skills were taught: rely on family/friends, exchange ideas with others, seek professionals or experts, organize daily activities, use positive self-talk, reframe the situation positively, change from usual reaction, and explore new ideas. The comparison group was instructed to write about events they deemed important or stressful. Mothers were instructed to write one or two pages in the journals once a day, every day for four weeks.

2.3. Data collection

Data related to family outcomes and maternal mental health outcomes were collected at baseline using structured interviews and by mail for the six-week follow-up. Participants returned their journals to the study office at the end of the four-week journaling exercise. This

report describes solely the journaling outcomes and demographic characteristics.

2.4. Data analysis

Feasibility was assessed by analyzing the journals for number of journal days completed and total number of words per journal. Acceptability was assessed by content analysis of verbatim transcriptions of open-ended exit interview responses of mothers regarding their journaling experience. Fidelity was analyzed by descriptions of resourcefulness skill application, and number and type of resourcefulness skills described.

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

Mothers (N = 22) were primarily Caucasian (82%), and had a yearly family income of \$40 K to \$80 K (Table 1). Most of the children were dependent on respiratory or nutritional support (OTA group 3) (Table 2). Sample characteristics are described in greater detail elsewhere (Toly et al., 2014).

3.2. Feasibility

A majority of the participants (95.5%) in both the RT group and comparison group completed the journaling intervention. One mother from the intervention group did not respond to follow-up data collection attempts. A total of 19 out of 22 mothers completed the journal writing for the total study period (four weeks). Two mothers in the RT group discontinued writing in journals due to health reasons: one due to pregnancy complications and another due to illness requiring surgery. Two mothers (one in the intervention group and one in the comparison group) completed the journal writing but did not want to share their journal with the research team. One of the mothers from the RT group attributed her reluctance to share her journal with a religious belief while the other mother in the comparison group felt that the entries were too private to share. On average, mothers in the RT group completed journal entries on 22.9 days (median = 25) compared with an average of 24.9 days (median = 26.5) for the comparison group. The mean number of days the mothers in both groups completed journal entries was 23.9 days with a median of 26 days with a range from 12 days to 28 days.

Journal word counts across both groups averaged 3319.16 words total with a median of 3017 words. Table 3 shows the total number of words written in the journals for the total sample of mothers who returned their journal to the study office (n = 19) and the two subgroups; RT intervention or comparison.

Depressive symptoms did not impact the feasibility of journaling. Mothers who had high depressive symptoms using the Center for

Table 1
Sample characteristics of mothers (N = 22).

	n	(%)
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic	0	(0)
African American	3	(14)
Caucasian	18	(82)
Asian	1	(4)
Age of mother (years)		
33–39	8	(36)
40–45	8	(36)
≥46	6	(28)
Family income		
≤\$40 K	5	(23)
\$40 K–\$80 K	10	(45)
≥\$80 K	7	(32)

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