

Short communication

My Changed Body: Background, development and acceptability of a self-compassion based writing activity for female survivors of breast cancer



Astrid Przedziecki^{a,b}, Jessica Alcorso^a, Kerry A. Sherman^{a,c,*}

^a Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

^b Liverpool Cancer Therapy Centre, Liverpool Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia

^c Westmead Breast Cancer Institute, Westmead Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess consumer and health professional user acceptability of a web-based self-compassion writing activity to minimize psychological distress related to the negative impact of breast cancer on body image.

Methods: “My Changed Body” is a web-based writing activity that combines expressive writing with a self-compassionate approach that focuses on cancer-related adverse body image alterations. Breast cancer survivors ($n = 15$) and health professionals ($n = 20$) provided feedback via a survey regarding the appearance, organization and content of the website and writing activity.

Results: Both breast cancer survivors and health professionals rated the website highly in terms of design, layout and content. Participants commented positively on the website’s clear wording, appealing design and ease of navigation. Suggestions for improving the website included simplifying the instructions for the writing activity and allowing participants’ writing to be saved.

Conclusion: Results from both breast cancer survivors and health professionals suggest a moderate to high level of user acceptability and positive ratings for the overall impression of the website.

Practice implications: Self-compassion based writing interventions can be translated to a web-based self-administered activity for body image difficulties after breast cancer treatment in a format that is acceptable to consumers and health professionals.

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1. Introduction

Breast cancer treatment can bring negative body changes, poor adjustment and ongoing psychological distress [1,2]. Central to this is the reality of change and loss regarding certain aspects of a woman’s appearance and function. In addition, some women develop lymphedema as a consequence of their treatment, characterized by severe swelling of the affected area, resulting in the need to wear visible compression garments [3], and consequently, further challenging the woman’s body image [4–6]. The Cash theoretical model suggests that adverse appearance changes will increase the discrepancy between an individual’s ideal and perceived body image, making her more likely to experience body image-related distress [7]. Unfortunately, body

image problems are not always adequately recognized or addressed, with evidence of unmet needs [1,2,7–9].

Many existing interventions designed to address body image difficulties after breast cancer treatment focus on couple or group formats within clinic settings [7], and have limited effectiveness for younger women [10]. Such approaches can be limited by demand for staff, cost, and the need to attend in-person, potentially resulting in poor accessibility [11]. There is a need for more interventions addressing body image distress that employ novel approaches, such as writing activities [7], that can be delivered in an individual, accessible format [12,13] which may especially benefit those with an increased reliance on online materials [14].

Expressive, unstructured writing has been used in the field of psychology [15] and oncology [16] to assist individuals who are experiencing distress. Writing interventions are a simple and inexpensive way to provide support, with evidence of physical and psychological benefits [15–17]. To date, unstructured writing has not been used to address cancer-related body image disturbances,

* Corresponding author at: Centre for Emotional Health, Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, 2109, Sydney, NSW, Australia.
Fax: +61 2 9850 8062.

E-mail address: kerry.sherman@mq.edu.au (K.A. Sherman).

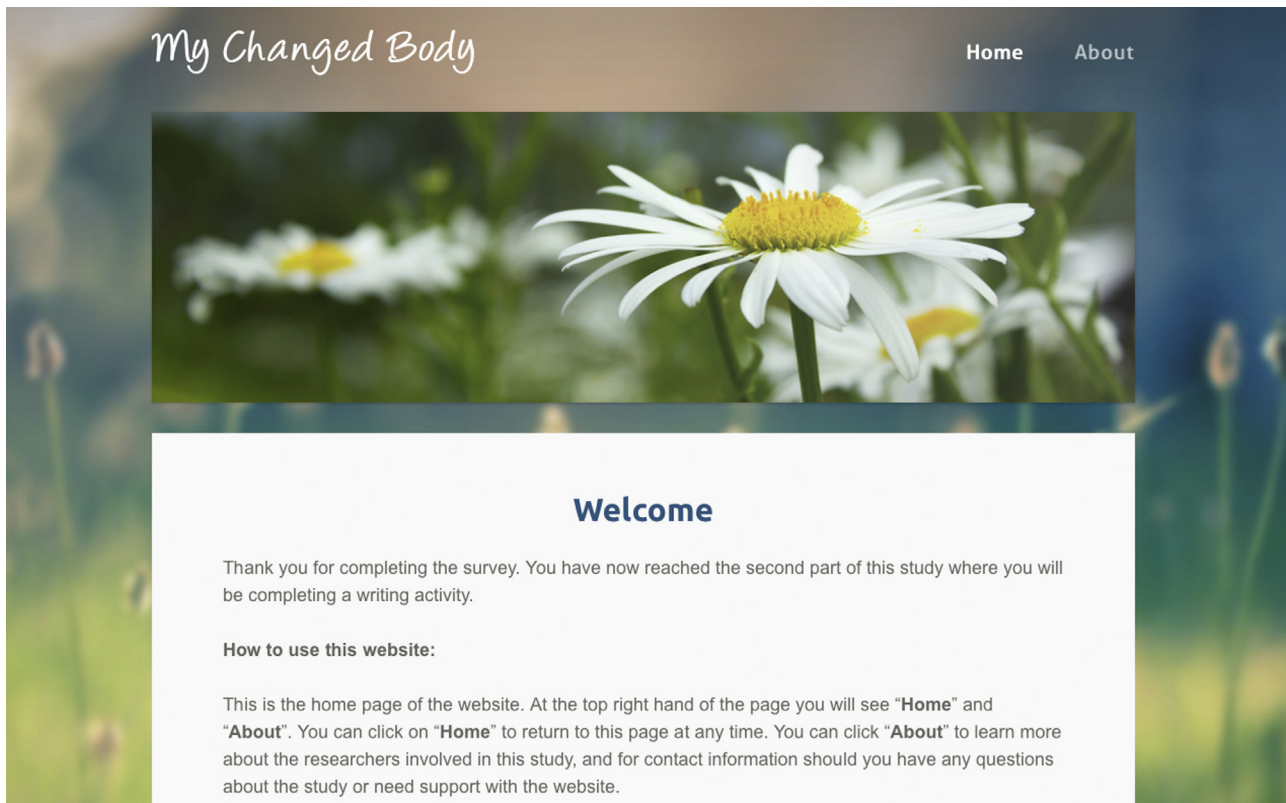


Fig. 1. Screenshot of the My Changed Body website 'Welcome' page.

possibly as despite its many strengths, limited effectiveness in addressing body image concerns has been demonstrated by unstructured expressive writing in a variety of contexts [18–22]. Alternatively, self-compassion based approaches may be uniquely placed to address the difficulties associated with body image disturbance [23]. Thus, a need to investigate this possibility in the cancer context is indicated.

Self-compassion is a promising approach to assist with difficult life experiences, and has been linked to lower psychopathology [24]. It relates to a woman's ability to approach herself with kindness, a sense of mindful awareness about her circumstances, within a context of common humanity (i.e., knowing difficulties and loss are normal part of human life) [25]. A woman who is higher in self-compassion is likely to display less self-criticism, a more accurate appraisal of her losses, as well as the ability to place her problems within the broader context of life [25,26]. Furthermore, there is evidence that self-compassion is associated with decreased body image disturbance and psychological distress in breast cancer survivors [2], therefore making it a potentially valuable aspect to address.

In sum, combining unstructured writing with self-compassion-based prompts may provide dual benefits of decreasing distress and body image disturbance related to breast cancer treatment and its outcomes in a single intervention.

2. Methods

2.1. My Changed Body intervention development

2.1.1. Website and content development

My Changed Body is a web-based writing intervention designed to address body image concerns arising from breast cancer and lymphedema. It entails a self-paced writing activity that is

estimated to take approximately 30 min to complete. The website provides "Welcome" page user instructions (Fig. 1) followed by information about the developers of the website. The remaining section comprises the intervention writing activity instructions, prompts and writing text boxes (Fig. 2). Six writing prompts are provided: (1) an introductory unstructured writing section where individuals write about a negative body image experience according to a modified Pennebaker [15] writing prompt; (2) treatment of one's body with kindness; (3) kind advice to oneself; (4) connection with others who experience difficulties with body image; (5) awareness of one's circumstances and reactions in a broader context; and, (6) a self-compassionate letter to the writer that acts as a summary of the most salient points of self-compassion as applied to one's own situation. Thus, the intervention user addresses self-kindness, common humanity and mindful awareness, as outlined by self-compassion research [25].

2.1.2. Consultation with consumers and health care professionals and assessment of user acceptability

Following website development, consumers (breast cancer survivors) and health professionals experienced in breast cancer were given access to the website and provided feedback via an online survey regarding their perceptions of the website. Consumers and health professionals were recruited to ensure that we gathered perspectives from the population of women who would be using the intervention, as well as from health professionals who would be referring women to the intervention. Health professionals were recruited from the researchers' networks via an online advertisement. Consumers were recruited via the consumer-based breast cancer organization, the Breast Cancer Network Australia.

Participants were sent a link to the study website and asked to interact with all web pages before completing the online user

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