Chapter 2
The Management of Cancer and Depression in People With Intellectual Disabilities:
Overcoming Barriers to Improve Care

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ABSTRACT

Intellectual disability (ID) is a lifelong impairment of cognition and adaptive behavior that emerges in the development period. ID is a differentiated disability, whose severity differs from mild to profound. People with ID all have unique strengths and deficits, and while some can live autonomously, others may need significant levels of support. Many people with ID are affected by cancer in their lifetime, and depression and anxiety are psychiatric syndromes that have been receiving the most attention in people with cancer. The chapter provides an overview of how exercise and psychotherapy can help people with ID to manage cancer and depression.

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual disability (ID) is a lifelong impairment of cognition and adaptive behaviour that emerges in the development period (Maulik et al., 2011). ID is a differentiated disability, whose severity varies from mild to profound (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Individuals with ID all have unique strengths and deficits, and while some can live autonomously, others may need significant levels of support (Schalock et al., 2021). The underlying causes of ID are heterogeneous, comprising chromosomal abnormality, gene mutation, environmental factors and prenatal factors (Flore & Milunsky, 2012; Karam et al., 2015).

Many people with ID are affected by cancer in their lifetime (Tuffrey-Wijne et al., 2006). One recent study (Liu et al., 2021) found that individuals with ID had an increased risk of any cancer, as well as of several specific cancer types. For example, they have proportionately higher rates of gastrointestinal cancer than the general population (48%-58.5% vs. 25% of cancer deaths; Duff et al., 2001).

Recent literature suggests a plausible connection between ID and cancer via several potential mechanisms. One possibility is that individuals with ID may be more likely to be exposed to potential risk factors for cancer, such as unhealthy and sedentary lifestyles including less optimal diets and lack of physical activity, which might also contribute to the initiation or development of some cancers (Caton et al., 2012). Nonetheless, population-based studies investigating the link between ID and cancer are largely missing (Liu et al., 2021).

Depression and anxiety are psychiatric syndromes that have received the most attention in people with cancer (Massie, 2004; Zeilinger et al., 2022). One recent study, which examined prevalence rates of anxiety and depression in a large sample of cancer outpatients with different cancer diagnoses, found approximately 35% of cancer patients with symptoms of anxiety and 30% with symptoms of depression (Zeilinger et al., 2022). Depression and anxiety persist in cancer patients, creating an additional burden during treatment and making it more challenging in terms of management and control (Naser et al., 2021).

Symptoms of depression in patients with ID can differ from those found in the general population and may include more prominent biological changes of an altered sleep/wake cycle, changes in appetite and weight, and significant diurnal variation in mood (Kaushal et al., 2016).

Considering vulnerability of individuals with ID and various discriminatory practices against them, including barriers in accessing healthcare, this chapter aims to provide an overview of the management of cancer and depression in people with ID and the potential benefits of psychological therapies and exercise.

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Definition

Historically, ID has been portrayed as a stable, lifelong and continuous condition characterised by deficits in cognitive and social spheres (Maulik et al., 2011; McKenzie, 2013). Traditionally, the characteristics of persons with ID were based on a clinical-medical model (McKenzie, 2013). Nowadays, the research discourse allows a conclusion that the concept has evolved towards an ecological, person-based and more dynamic perspective (Ćwirynkało, 2022; McKenzie, 2013).

For the purposes of the current chapter, the authors adopt a definition by American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, according to which ID "is characterized by significant

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