Relaxation with guided imagery in cancer treatment: an integrative review

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BACKGROUND: Currently, cancer is one of the diseases that kill the most, since fined undifferentiated cells are highly capable of spreading to other tissues. Conventional treatments for cancer are often associated with side effects that significantly affect the quality of life of patients and lead them to seek non-pharmacological resources that help them to control and prevent such symptoms. The mind-body therapies, especially relaxation and guided imagery have been used as a way to help the cancer patient for relieving symptoms of the disease and treatment, and useful for coping and the patient's rehabilitation process.

HYPOTHESIS: Therefore, based on the assumption that the use of such therapy needs to be studied and understood by professionals who treat patients with cancer, the aim of this study was to analyze the scientific literature on the use of complementary therapy relaxation with imagination guided in cancer patients and perform a synthesis of knowledge produced in accordance with levels of evidence as well as identify possible gaps in such productions.

METHODS: This is an integrative review on the use of relaxation with guided imagery in cancer patients undergoing treatment, in Portuguese, English or Spanish, published in January 2004 period to December 2014, indexed on the basis of data: Medline, CINAHL, Lilacs and SciELO electronic library, with available abstracts. For search of such studies, we used the internet and the combination of the following descriptors: relaxation; neoplasms; complementary therapies; oncology nursing; and imagination. Ten articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed in full, three thematic categories being established: relaxation effects; Aspects inherent to the patient; and motivations for using the therapy.

RESULTS: The main effects of the use of relaxation with guided imagery were: reduced anxiety and hopelessness; improved emotional state and physical well-being; favor of immunological responses; relieving tension; reduction in pain, fatigue, loss of appetite and sleep disturbance; and increase the overall health of patients. Regarding thematic category Effects of relaxation, relaxation with guided imagery exercise showed an improvement in symptoms caused by cancer treatment, and promoted important physiological effects to combat disease, such as increased immune responses. Regarding the category aspects inherent to the patient, it was noted that factors related to gender, age and level of education were also identified on the chances of completion of therapy by patients. On the latter category, Motivations for using the therapy, we can see that the therapy has shown good results as well about the effects of cancer treatment, especially in pain-related. The results of this study indicate that it is important to develop research with emphasis on scientific evidence in order to draw conclusions about the benefits of using complementary relaxation therapy with guided imagery in cancer patients, and especially to promote excellence in nursing care to these patients.