

Pathways To Overcoming MS: Evaluating A Peer-Led Community Engagement Initiative



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Introduction

The role of modifiable lifestyle risk factors for multiple sclerosis (MS) has been highlighted as a promising preventive strategy, with potential to promote wellbeing for people with MS, families/carers, as well as the health system (Palmer et al., 2013). The Overcoming MS Program is an evidence-based approach to managing MS that integrates information about diet, stress management, exercise and prevention. The initiative reported here evaluated the impact of a 6-week one-hour peer facilitated information course which aimed to educate, empower and connect people with MS through discussion of the Overcoming MS Program.

Methods

Advertising through social media/newsletter recruited 26 people. Participants received a Welcome Pack and access to a closed Facebook group created for the cohort to meet and pose questions, ensuring the course was in part co-designed. Pre and post course evaluation scale was developed to assess subjective wellbeing, self-management skills (of MS), familiarity with/confidence about the lifestyle changes advocated in the Overcoming MS program.

Anonymous qualitative feedback for each session and the course overall was gathered by Community Engagement Programme Manager. Sessions were delivered online and format of sessions involved a topic focused educational element followed by interactive questions/answers.

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“Friendly, informative, a safe space to ask ‘those’ questions!”

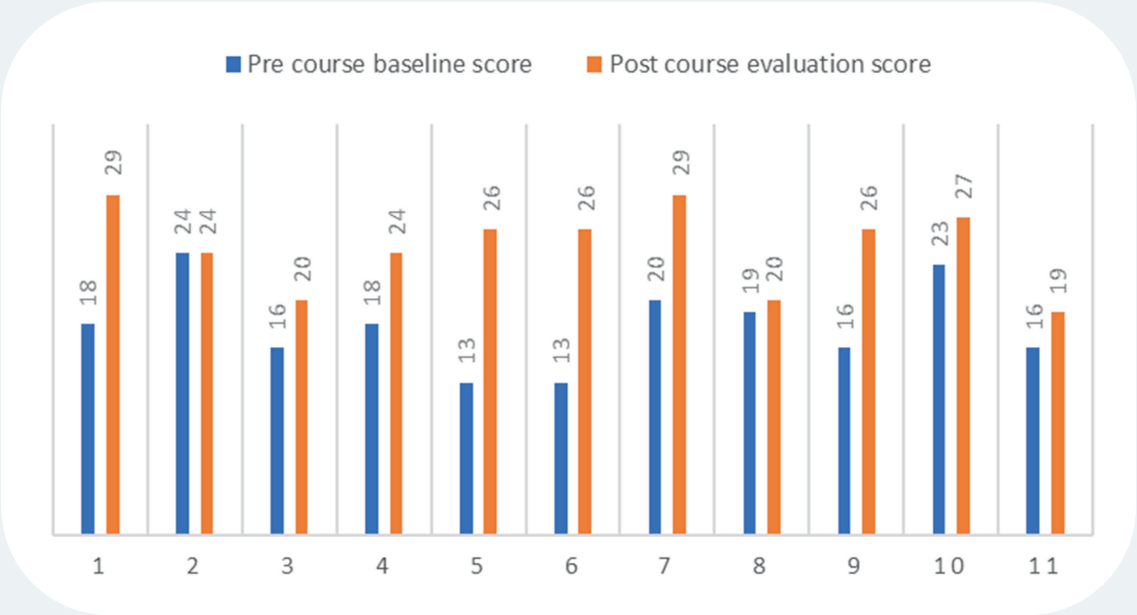
“Since still being early in diagnosis, anxiety takes over many days. The course, the contact and especially seeing other people trying their best and doing well gives me enormous hope and strength. Thank you for this opportunity to reach out and get in touch.”

“I really liked being able to meet and see different people living with MS this has been so key for me as I’m yet to meet anyone with MS. It really helped my mental health and my positivity outlook on my diagnosis. Thank you all very much.”

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Results

Comparison of pre and post course scores demonstrated significant change across all measures with participants reporting improvements in understanding the behaviour changes in the Overcoming MS Program. Critically, subjective wellbeing increased from 11% to 36%, and retention of engaged participants was high (88%) with 100% stating they would recommend to a friend. Qualitative data highlighted key themes of hope and motivation, the value of the group being led by professionals with lived experience, the opportunity to ask questions, and connecting with like-minded people.



Conclusions

Peer facilitated and targeted lifestyle interventions for people with MS may be an effective way to deliver evidence-based information, motivate people to make/sustain behaviour change, and build supportive relationship/networks. Online delivery enables this intervention to remain cost-effective and enhances accessibility.