Examining the Effectiveness of the Physical Activity Health Education Program for Persons with Multiple Sclerosis (HEMS): A Qualitative Examination
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Introduction
- Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an auto-immune disease affecting 400,000 people in the United States
- Physical Activity (PA) has been demonstrated to improve quality of life for persons with MS
- HEMS is a theoretically based program that aims to increase participation
  - No evaluation of the program for participant feedback has been completed

Purpose
- To complete focus groups with participants who completed the HEMS program to obtain feedback on the effectiveness of the program

Methods
Participants
- Eight HEMS participants
- 75% Female
- Mean age: 59
- MS Type: Relapsing remitting (88%); Secondary progressive (12%)

Procedures
- Two groups completed a 60 minute focus group discussion
- Questions explored:
  1. Usefulness of the program content
  2. Presentation program materials
  3. Barriers & adherence to the program
  4. Data collection procedures

Qualitative Analysis
- Investigator Triangulation – Perspectives from three coders to establish trustworthiness
- Critical friend – Staff separate from triangulation reviewed themes

Results
HEMS Meta-Themes
- Goal setting
- Environment: Supportive & open environment
- Structure of program
- Social support

Improvement of program
- Measurement tools: Activity logs & pedometer
- Additional self-compassion component

Effectiveness of Program
- “The idea of looking at PA as counting as an exercise is helpful for me” –HEMS Participant
- “If I set goals, physical activity goals but other goals as well, if I set them then I reach many of them. If I don’t set them I seem to get far less accomplished” –HEMS Participant
- “Goal setting have always worked for me so one thing I learned in here is that the goal or prize could be something like painting a room in your home” –HEMS Participant

Participant Meta-Themes
- Disability: cognitive, physical limitations, and fatigue
- Accessibility: transportation
- Environment: weather
- Knowledge: Lack of knowledge about PA & lack of social support

Facilitators or Motivators
- Social support
- Self efficacy may increase PA
- Goal setting
- Access to MS exercise clinic

Barriers to PA
- Overcoming barriers
- Plans for future PA
- Intentions

Knowledge of PA

Conclusion
- Overall, the participants found HEMS useful with the assessment tools/procedures needing the most improvement.
- Based on the focus group findings, the HEMS program could be modified to include:
  1. Additional module covering nutrition
  2. Modified activity logs
  3. Rearrangement of scheduling of HEMS program
  4. Implement mentor program

“I don’t think there’s a real level of understanding of where we are coming from all the time” –HEMS Participant