A Review of Nia as an Exercise Option for Cancer Survivors

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Nia is a fusion fitness program that blends elements from the dance arts, martial arts, and healing arts, creating a workout that is adaptable to all ages and fitness levels. As a nontraditional form of exercise, Nia integrates body, mind, and spirit as well as the five sensations of flexibility, agility, mobility, strength, and stability. Nia incorporates both cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning and is adaptable to those with a sedentary or active lifestyle, making it useful for the varying abilities of cancer survivors. Oncology nurses are in a key position to educate individuals with cancer on the benefits of exercise, such as improved physical functioning and quality of life, and decreased cancer-related fatigue. The purpose of this article is to familiarize oncology nurses with the potential benefits of Nia for cancer survivors.

Exercise during and after cancer therapy can improve physical functioning, quality of life, and cancer-related fatigue (Schmitz et al., 2010). In general, exercise studies have predominately focused on traditional exercise modalities of walking, mixed aerobic formats, and resistance training. Comparatively, a limited body of evidence-based research exists on nontraditional exercise for patients with cancer. Nontraditional exercise typically focuses on not only the body, but the mind and spirit. Some nontraditional approaches and their benefits are beginning to be reported in the literature (Chen et al., 2013; Fong et al., 2013; Reid-Arndt, Matsuda, & Cox, 2012; Sadja & Mills, 2013).

Nia, a nontraditional form of exercise, is a cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning program that was started in 1983 by two aerobics instructors. Nia incorporates nontraditional exercise forms, like yoga and tai chi, with traditional exercise methods, like dance, that are more cardiovascular in nature. Nia is referred to as “the body’s way,” a method of using and listening to the body in accord with its specific design and structure, therefore allowing the practice to be both gentle for the individual with a sedentary lifestyle and challenging for someone with an active lifestyle (Rosas & Rosas, 2004). Nia is particularly suitable to the individual with cancer, as it is adaptable to the varying symptoms and side effects experienced by patients based on cancer type and treatment modality.

Nia has been shown to reduce anxiety and fatigue in women with breast cancer (Lopez, Bensen, Guillen, Kurker, & Johnson, 2001; Reis, Walsh, Young-McCaughan, & Jones, 2013). A pilot study of 19 women with a history of breast cancer compared Nia to a prescribed walking routine (Lopez et al., 2001). The Nia group had a significant reduction in anxiety (p = 0.02), and although not statistically significant, the results also showed a reduction in depression and improved immune function (Lopez et al., 2001). Lopez et al. (2001) did not report either the number or length of sessions tested. In addition, Reis et al. (2013) conducted a 12-week, randomized, controlled trial comparing Nia practiced at home (n = 22) to usual care (n = 19) in women with breast cancer undergoing radiation therapy and found that women practicing Nia reported significantly less fatigue between 6 and 12 weeks compared to the usual care group (p = 0.05). In the study, participants in the Nia group received instruction and demonstration on Nia and were provided with...
a DVD about Nia for home practice. Participants were asked to practice Nia for 20–60 minutes at least three times per week. The study also found trends demonstrating improvements in quality of life, aerobic capacity, and shoulder flexibility in the Nia group (Reis et al., 2013).

One of the core aspects of Nia is listening to the body. In a convenience sample of 77 female college students, aerobic classes (n = 37) and Nia classes (n = 40) were taught by the same instructor for one hour twice a week for seven weeks (Kern & Baker, 1997). Participants in the Nia classes reported being able to “let go” while practicing Nia and being able to incorporate breathing techniques outside of the classes. Participants also reported feeling less stressed, more calm, and more relaxed (Kern & Baker, 1997). The women in the aerobic classes did not report the same experiences. Potentially, these positive psychological effects of Nia could also be realized in patients with cancer.

**Instructor Training**

Nia training uses an approach similar to martial arts, progressing through a series of levels: white, green, blue, brown, and black belts. Body-centered awareness is taught to Nia instructors throughout the training program, equating fitness with movement and not exercise.

### Incorporating the Body, Mind, and Spirit in Nia

Nia empowers the individual to make movement choices with a body, mind, and spirit focus, allowing the individual not only a way of “working out” but also a way of “working in”—going inside physically as well as emotionally (Rosas & Rosas, 2004). Participants have discovered that, by focusing on how their body feels, they become more aware of body sensations. For example, some individuals with cancer have found that they are moving in ways that protect an incision or radiation site, which can restrict range of motion. With enhanced awareness, they are able to alter movements over time and increase mobility and/or comfort. After practicing Nia, other participants came to the realization that they had disconnected their awareness of the area affected by cancer (i.e., chest after a mastectomy surgery), causing them to bury emotions about the cancer. With renewed awareness, those practicing Nia can release emotions that may facilitate the healing process (Rosas & Rosas, 2004).

### Five Sensations Integrated With Nia

Nia integrates five sensations for a balanced program: flexibility, agility, mobility, strength, and stability (Rosas & Rosas, 2004) (see Table 1). These sensations serve as tools to achieve health and fitness. The instructor guides the participant to become aware of what each sensation feels like in the body and explore the body’s way in his or her own way.

### Nine Movement Forms of Nia

The five sensations are integrated through nine Nia movement forms. The movement forms are based within the martial arts (tao chi, tae kwon do, and aikido), dance arts (jazz, modern, and Duncan), and healing arts (Moshe Feldenrais, the Alexander technique, and yoga). The movement forms are taught at three intensity levels (chair, moderate, and athletic) (see Figure 1) and can be modified depending on individual need, furthering the adaptive nature of Nia. The movements provide a flexible physical activity framework that allows the individual to listen to the voice of the body, mind, and spirit and direct movements accordingly. Unlike traditional forms of exercise, which often entrain the body to one system of movement through the use of repetitive and mechanical motions, the multiple movement forms offered in Nia allow the body to adapt to the variety of rhythms and movements in life and allow for greater creativity and individual expression (Rosas & Rosas, 2004).

### TABLE 1. The Five Sensations of Nia

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensation</th>
<th>Type of Energy</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Agility</td>
<td>Energy of start and stop. This energy corresponds with many life situations where the participant has to move and then stop and focus.</td>
<td>Sensing movement that is dynamic, such as a freeze pose provides toning to the body (strength) and then balance with a movement of flow (flexibility). A sensation of remaining active and then coming to balance and stillness allows the participant to focus with greater precision.</td>
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<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Energy moving outward. A physical feeling of releasing.</td>
<td>Using the eyes to follow the hands, allowing greater flexibility of the neck and shoulders (where many people feel and hold tension) allows the joints to open and close, which can create lengthening and relaxation in the body.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Energy in constant motion.</td>
<td>Continuous movement, such as walking in place and having the participant sense his or her whole body in motion. It may feel like a controlled agitation and excitation within the joints, muscles, and bones—playfulness which gives ease and energy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Energy in readiness for outward expression. Stability is sensed as energy moving from the center and out into all directions.</td>
<td>Participants feel the balance on one foot and then shift to an action movement. The body is in a state of balance and relaxation, yet readiness to move as needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Energy moving inward.</td>
<td>A martial arts block. The muscles are in harmony with the bones and joints. It may be a sensation of packing energy against the bones, giving alignment and stability. The participant learns awareness of inner strength and power during times when the body may feel weak.</td>
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Note. Based on information from Rosas & Rosas, 2004.
Experience in the Outpatient Setting

Since 2002, an outpatient oncology center located in northwest Ohio has offered Nia classes to patients with cancer. To date, classes are provided at two locations and include a monthly class at the outpatient oncology center and a weekly class at an off-site location that provides services to individuals with cancer. In 2012, more than 300 women with a cancer diagnosis participated in Nia classes. The majority of women were breast cancer survivors at least two years post-treatment. About 25% were in active treatment, and four were in the middle of breast reconstructive surgery. Other cancer diagnoses included lung cancer, thyroid cancer, multiple myeloma, and colon cancer.

Nia is meant to be organic and adaptable to individual needs (Rosas & Rosas, 2004). The multiple movement forms, three intensity levels, five sensations, and body, mind, and spirit focus provide an exercise option that can meet the varying needs of patients with cancer. For example, patients who are not feeling strong enough to stand are advised to practice the routine in a chair, patients with breast cancer with limited shoulder range of motion from surgical interventions are taught how to adjust arm movements, and those struggling with the emotional impact of cancer are shown how to use their voice to express and release.

The Nia instructor at the oncology center is an advanced practice nurse at the Nia black belt level. When teaching classes, she demonstrates the adaptable movement options and encourages the participants to focus on how their body feels rather than how much their body can do. This permits individuals to exercise at a level that is comfortable for them. Individuals completing evaluations of the Nia classes offered through the oncology center have commented that Nia is enjoyable, provides body and emotional awareness, and teaches them to respect their current situation. A few specific comments have included: “Nia helped me to let go and find a source of healing and peace,” “I enjoyed the physical and emotional aspects of moving,” “I learned to respect my body and go at my own pace,” “It is uplifting and energizing,” and “I now believe exercise is fun.”

Patient Safety and Education

Participants are encouraged to listen to their body throughout a Nia routine and to adjust movements so that every movement feels comfortable. A few of the safety tips that are taught throughout a Nia routine include the following.

• Take off shoes. Shoes can create stress on the knee and ankle (Shakoor & Block, 2006), cause impact-related injury (Lieberman et al., 2010), and limit a person’s connection to his or her body. Bare feet allow for a sense of balance and grounding.
• Place feet parallel with toes pointing forward. This helps to protect the knees.
• Keep the head, chest, and pelvis aligned. Keeping the knees parallel with the toes helps to integrate the spine and protect the back.
• Use the eyes to move and integrate the head—looking up when reaching up and looking down when moving downward: Using the eyes to move and integrate the head helps keep the neck free of tension.
• Learning to breathe with movement allows greater relaxation and flexibility. The tendency is for a person to hold his or her breath when moving. With Nia, participants are reminded to breathe throughout a movement.

Implications for Oncology Nurses

Oncology nurses work in a variety of settings and, therefore, are in a unique position to offer suggestions about exercise interventions that may help patients manage symptoms and side effects. Oncology nurses should have knowledge of both traditional and nontraditional types of exercise. Nia may be a
highly desirable option for patients with cancer as it requires no exercise equipment or visits to an exercise facility, is adaptable to any level of fitness, and can easily be incorporated into any lifestyle. As oncology nurses gain a greater understanding of Nia concepts, they will be able to suggest Nia as part of a survivorship plan of health. More information on Nia, including educational materials, Nia DVDs, and instructor listing, can be found at www.NiaNow.com.

Conclusion

As a nontraditional form of exercise, Nia offers body, mind, and spirit benefits to patients with cancer. Preliminary research among patients with cancer has shown that Nia has positive effects on anxiety and fatigue. Oncology nurses can educate patients on the benefits of Nia and suggest it as part of a comprehensive plan of care. Additional research is needed to more fully understand the role of Nia in the rehabilitation of patients with cancer.

References


Implications for Practice

- Explore current research, which shows that Nia is beneficial to women with breast cancer in reducing anxiety and fatigue, and may improve depression, immune function, quality of life, aerobic capacity, and shoulder flexibility.
- Educate individuals with cancer on the benefits of Nia as an exercise option during and following treatment.
- Consider Nia as a versatile option for a survivorship program, as Nia is adaptable to any level of fitness.