EXPLORATION INTO THE EFFECTS OF AN EXERCISE PROGRAMME ON THE LIVES OF ELDERLY FEMALE FALLERS

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Introduction

As the number of elderly people increases in our society so does the number of falls and resultant injuries in this age group. Falls can profoundly threaten the quality of life for the faller especially when the ability to live independently is concerned. The resultant fear of falling has been reported as a major consequence. Cumming et al related this to fall self-efficacy and demonstrated that those people with a high fall self-efficacy had a significantly lower risk of falling. A lot of studies have concentrated on the effect of different fall prevention programmes but the experience of falls on the faller's life has less often been reported. Porter (1999) argued that understanding the variability of these different experiences was an essential basis for falls intervention measures.

Methods

Qualitative research methodology using a phenomenological approach was chosen as the most appropriate for exploring the experiences of elderly lady fallers attending exercise classes ranging in duration from one year to eighteen months. These classes were part of a large research project run by Dr Dawn Skelton. A total of thirty ladies agreed to take part in five focus groups representing the five exercise classes and six other members of these groups took part in in-depth interviews. The focus groups were used in an exploratory way to gain insight into a complex problem and the emerging categories became the conceptual framework for the interviews. Confidentiality was ensured and the full transcript was offered to all the participants. The analysis of the data was carried out following established guidelines.

Results and Discussion

It may not be surprising that the participants' reasons for falling were multifactorial. However the perceived benefits from the programme had some similarity in that it was possible to categorise changes within the social domain (e.g. re-engagement with the community), psychological (e.g. a reduction in fear of falling) and functional improvement (e.g. activities necessary for daily living) amongst others. One question that emerged was whether the similarity of responses reflected the similarity of the participants and therefore was not representative. On the other hand one of the major pitfalls of the focus technique is the potential impact of censoring and conforming and for this reason six in-depth interviews were carried out. All of these participants detailed a transformation both psychological and functional to a varying degree. They were explicit about their feelings of increasing age and how they think society viewed them. On the whole they all concurred that the elderly were underestimated in their physical abilities. Their strong desire to be independent was a major finding. The fallers felt that the classes addressed this by being task directed, providing explanations and high expectations without being patronising. The role of the instructor was linked to this. The group members responded to the classes by commitment to a task. They all appeared to have full lifestyles and maintained a strong sense of curiosity. Judging by the benefits experienced, the interviewees stated the importance of making a wider group of fallers aware of these programmes.

References