



BEYOND THE DIAGNOSIS

: EMOTIONS AND COPING AMONG PATIENTS WITH ADVANCED CANCER

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Background

- The diagnosis of advanced cancer is a psychologically challenging experience (Podbury et al., 2024)
- Patients with advanced cancer often encounter a wide range of emotional responses, which can negatively impact treatment adherence and quality of life (Zhang et al., 2023).
- The experience of emotional upheaval during this time necessitates adaptive coping mechanisms to manage the complex feelings that arise (Obispo et al., 2023).

Purpose

- To understand the emotions and coping strategies experienced by advanced cancer patients who received a nurse-led enhanced supportive care as an approach to early primary palliative care.

Methods

- Design** A secondary data analysis from the randomized controlled trial (Choi et al., 2025)
- Participants** Advanced cancer patients who received and completed a nurse-led enhanced supported care intervention
- Intervention** A total of 5 sessions of symptom management and coping enhancement counseling
- Data collection** Two major emotions and their trajectories across the five sessions were assessed, and two effective coping strategies were identified during the intervention.
- Analysis** Descriptive statistics analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27.

Results

Participants

- Advanced cancer patients with the mean age of 57.5 ± 11.74 (N=80).
- Overall, 56.3% were fully active (ECOG 0), and the remaining 43.7% were ambulatory and capable of light work but had some restriction in physically strenuous activity (ECOG 1).

Emotions

- Among 17 reported emotions, **feeling sorry** was most prevalent (18.4%), followed by **worry** (8.9%), **fear** (8.9%), **anxiety** (8.2%), **heartbreak** (7.0%), and **frustration** (7.0%).
- All 17 emotions showed general decreasing trend over time and had further declined by 3 months (Visit 5) (Figure 1).
- At baseline, the strongest emotion was **sadness** (8.8/10), followed by **heartbreak** (8.3/10), **feeling sorry** (8.0/10), **upset** (7.8/10), **fear** (7.7/10), **regret** (7.7/10), and **lonely** (7.7/10).
- At 3 months, **tired** had the highest mean score (4.5/10), followed by upset (2.7/10), feeling sorry (2.2/10), fear (2.1/10), annoyed (2.0/10), lonely (2.0/10). All other emotions had mean scores below 2.0.

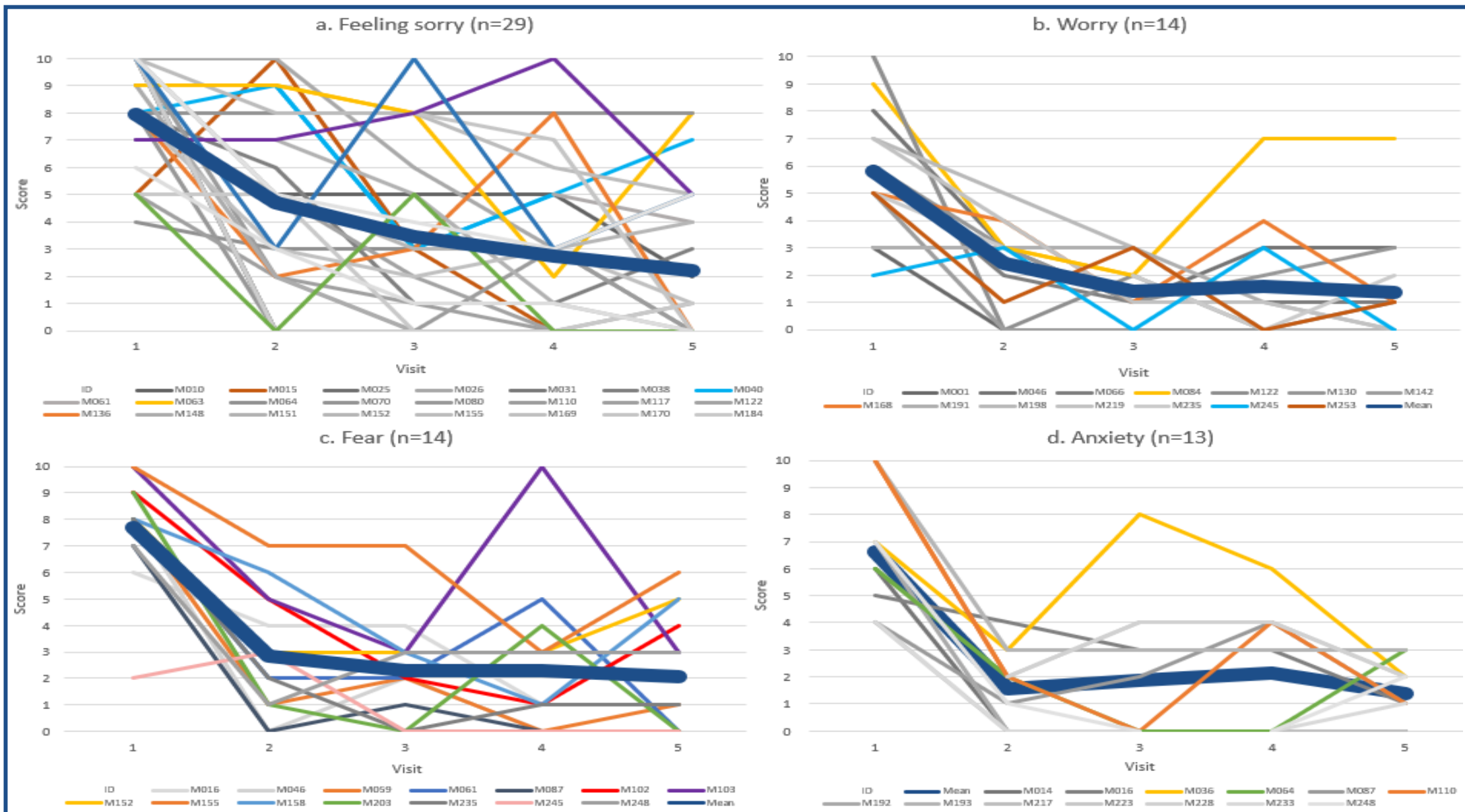


Figure 1. Level of emotions over time

Results cont'd

Coping strategies

- The most frequently reported coping strategy was **positive reframing** (34%), followed by **acceptance** (14%), **using instrumental support** (14%), **humor** (12%), and **active coping** (11%) (Figure 2).
- The most commonly co-occurring coping strategy pair was **positive reframing + acceptance** (16%), followed by positive reframing + active coping (13%), positive reframing + using emotional support (11%), positive reframing + using instrumental support (11%), and positive reframing + humor (11%) (Figure 3).

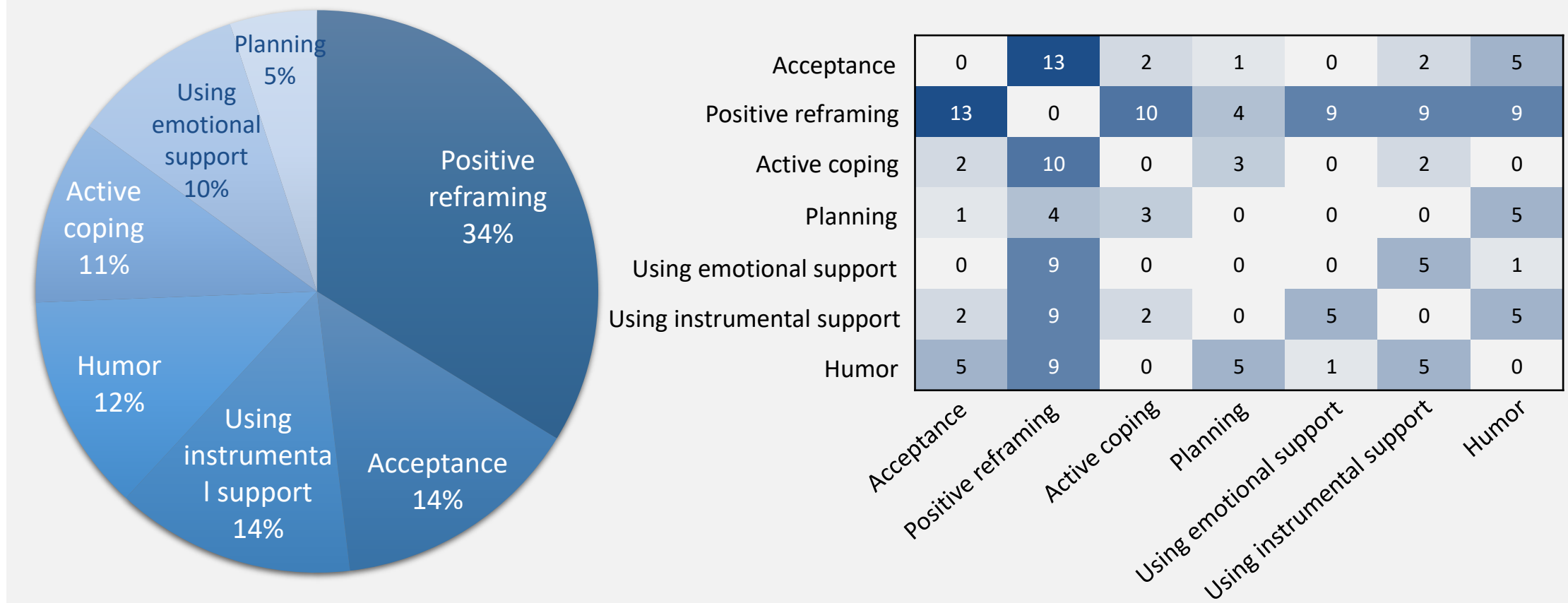


Figure 2. Prevalence of coping strategies

Acceptance	0	13	2	1	0	2	5
Positive reframing	13	0	10	4	9	9	9
Active coping	2	10	0	3	0	2	0
Planning	1	4	3	0	0	0	5
Using emotional support	0	9	0	0	0	5	1
Using instrumental support	2	9	2	0	5	0	5
Humor	5	9	0	5	1	5	0

Figure 3. Co-occurring coping pair

Each cell indicates the number of times the coping strategies in the corresponding row and column were reported together

Discussion

Emotions

- In the current study, Korean advanced cancer patients experienced sadness, heartbreaking, and feeling sorry were the most intense emotions. In a study where the majority of participants were Caucasian, advanced cancer patients expressed fear more than anger or sadness (Kennifer et al., 2009).
- The severity of all emotions decreased over the 3-month follow-up, suggesting a natural process of emotional adjustment and adaptation to illness within 12 months (Sutton et al., 2022). Nonetheless, early detection of negative emotions is essential, because unaddressed negative emotions can adversely affect quality of life (Ostovar et al., 2022).

Coping strategies

- In the current study, positive reframing was the most frequently used coping strategy, followed by acceptance, and instrumental support, whereas Nipp et al. (2016) reported that emotional support was used the most, followed by active coping and acceptance. Since using emotional support and acceptance were correlated with better quality of life and mood (Nipp et al., 2026), patients could be encouraged to use these coping strategies.
- Emotion-focused approaches, such as positive reframing, acceptance, and humor, have been associated with reduced emotional distress (Dev et al., 2024), suggesting that nurses could encourage patients to utilize these strategies.

Conclusion

- Advanced cancer patients experience a wide range of emotions following their diagnosis.
- Although the intensity of these emotions generally decreases over time, healthcare providers need to recognize emotional fluctuations and provide additional support as needed.
- Advanced cancer patients possess coping resources, highlighting the importance of helping them identify and employ effective coping strategies in their cancer journey.

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