

Psychological distress screening in cancer patients: psychometric properties of tools available in Italy

Barbara Muzzatti, and Maria Antonietta Annunziata

Unit of Oncological Psychology, Centro di Riferimento Oncologico, IRCCS Istituto Nazionale Tumori, Aviano (PN), Italy

ABSTRACT

Aims and background. The main national and international organisms recommend continuous monitoring of psychological distress in cancer patients throughout the disease trajectory. The reasons for this concern are the high prevalence of psychological distress in cancer patients and its association with a worse quality of life, poor adherence to treatment, and stronger assistance needs. Most screening tools for psychological distress were developed in English-speaking countries. To be fit for use in different cultural contexts (like the Italian), they need to undergo accurate translation and specific validation. In the present work we summarized the validation studies for psychological distress screening tools available in Italian that are most widely employed internationally, with the aim of helping clinicians choose the adequate instrument. With knowledge of the properties of the corresponding Italian versions, researchers would be better able to identify the instruments that deserve further investigation.

Methods. We carried out a systematic review of the literature.

Results. Twenty-nine studies of eight different instruments (five relating to psychological distress, three to its depressive component) were identified. Ten of these studies involved cancer patients and 19 referred to the general population or to non-cancer, non-psychiatric subjects. For seven of the eight tools, data on concurrent and discriminant validity were available. For five instruments data on criterion validity were available, for four there were data on construct validity, and for one tool divergent and cross-cultural validity data were provided. For six of the eight tools the literature provided data on reliability (mostly about internal consistency).

Conclusions. Since none of the eight instruments for which we found validation studies relative to the Italian context had undergone a complete and organic validation process, their use in the clinical context must be cautious. Italian researchers should be proactive and make a valid and reliable screening tool for Italian patients available.

Key words: cancer, psychological distress, screening, reliability, validity.

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Correspondence to: Maria Antonietta Annunziata, Centro di Riferimento Oncologico, IRCCS Istituto Nazionale Tumori, Via F Gallini 2, 33080 Aviano (PN), Italy.
email annunziata@cro.it

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