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NEW APPROACH TO REDUCING STRESS AND ANXIETY OF PSYCHOSOMATIC PATIENTS

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Abstract

Psychosomatic diseases are conditions in which a person has physical symptoms that occur for psychological reasons. The treatment for psychosomatic disorders includes both therapeutic and psychological service. Psychosomatic patients usually are recommended to avoid from stressful situations. However, in many cases such popular tools as meditation, relaxation techniques are not enough to help with stress management. In my practice as a clinical psychologist, I use innovative approach for creation of positive thought patterns of my patients. This approach is based on EMDR treatment method (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) supported by innovative equipment for psychological diagnostics. EMDR, developed by Dr Francine Shapiro, helps to alleviate distress associated with traumatic memories, which is often connected with childhood experience. Equipment for psychological diagnostics allows me to define the strength – weakness of the central nervous system, its lability, and sensitivity, the psycho-emotional stability of a person, as well as detect defensive mechanisms and index stress level. Based upon my practice, discovery of childhood traumas, as well as understanding about strong characteristics of the self and correction of defensive mechanisms can play important role in improving the emotional comfort and physical health of psychosomatic patients. I started to use this approach in 2015. In my paper I would like to show how the combination of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing treatment method and innovative psychological diagnostics is especially successful in case of such psychosomatic

diseases, as irritable bowel syndrome, duodenal ulcers and tension headache. In which way this approach can construct positive thought pattern of a person.

Keywords

Stress, EMDR, Psychological Diagnostics, Psychosomatic Diseases

1. Introduction

Recently research on the connection between the mental and physical health has increasingly developed. The interaction between consciousness and healing has become especially interesting field of analysis.

Research conducted by the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention at Stanford University showed that excessive stress is detrimental and can contribute to various diseases (Bialek, 2013).

Most of problems reported to physicians concern stress situations and emotional traumas experienced by patients. As Gennadii Starshenbaum notes, ‘somatic symptoms, such as migraines, insomnia, muscular and articular pain often reflect the emotional problems of people or indicate an anxiety disorder or tendency to depression’ (Starshenbaum, 2015).

Medical doctors admit that when we are under constant emotional stress, hormones decrease our immunity and it can lead to diseases, especially psychosomatic and autoimmune ones. As Daniel Siegel notes, regret, inhibited anger and a feeling of defeat cause the overproduction of hormones that block the immune system. The cells of body of a person experiences lost-lasting stress lose their self-repair ability (Siegel, 1999). According to Dr Debora Lee, people experiencing negative events often keep fighting to fathom what is going on only in their mind (Lee,& James, 2012). Most of people who have trauma describe being overwhelmed with a toxic cocktail of intense emotions. They get locked into self-accusatory spirals. Attempts to exclude unwanted thoughts from consciousness often make the thoughts more intrusive and frustrating. The failure to suppress an unwanted thought can lead to feelings of failure about thinking process: the individual may come to conclusion that he/she isn’t capable to control unwanted thoughts. Feeling of guilt, shame, and isolation often causes self-destructive behavior (Korner, 2012).

As a rule, people are not able to manage their emotional energy. According to Elliot S. Dacher, most of people submit to it unconsciously and ‘specific behaviours are provoked by that negative energy’ (Dacher, 2006).

It should be mentioned that stress is generated not only by external circumstances but also by specific ways of thinking and feeling, inadequate interpretation of certain events and, therefore, tensions in the body. Therefore, health requires a change of perception and of the improper beliefs.

Moreover, that means that physical health needs the condition of a well-balanced consciousness. That's not an easy task, especially for someone who struggles with objective or subjective stressors. In many cases such person had negative emotional experience in childhood. As follows from my practice as a clinical psychologist, a typical characteristic of patients traumatized in childhood, is high repression tendencies for psychological evaluation and management. They often have anxiety and symptoms of depression. They mainly use defensive mechanisms such as repression, denial and regression. In order to reduce their anxiety, they feel the need to use more and more of their defensive mechanisms. However, these mechanisms no longer help them to avoid free-floating fears.

Meanwhile, each person is capable of using their own emotional energy in a constructive way, using exercises to manage stress and negative emotions while constructing positive emotions.

Deepak Chopra, an endocrinologist and the founder of the Centre for Wellbeing, claims that there are a lot of ways to successfully heal chronic diseases (Chopra, 2009). His approach to human health is based on ideas about the mind-body relationship and a belief in the primacy of consciousness over matter: 'consciousness creates reality'. In his view, consciousness is both subject and object. It is consciousness that creates reality; we are not 'physical machines that have somehow learned to think, but thoughts that have learned to create a physical machine'.

2. Psychosomatic Disease as an Effect of Emotional Trauma

Neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan stresses that psychosomatic disorders are physical symptoms that mask emotional distress. As she underlines, 'everybody's experience of illness is their own ... moulded by life experience and personality' (O'Sullivan, 2017). In her book titled 'Is it all in your head?: True stories of imaginary illness' she reveals the taboos surrounding psychosomatic disorders, showing that 'it's all in our heads' doesn't mean that something isn't real, because the body is often the stand-in for the mind when the latter doesn't possess the tools to put words to its sorrow.

According to the holistic health expert, author of Recall Healing concept Gilbert Renaud, when our mind cannot resolve emotional problems, it creates a program of illness (Renaud, 2014). The disease appears as a solution for emotional discomfort and soul pain.

In my practice I treated a number of psychosomatic patients suffering from such diseases, as irritable bowel syndrome, duodenal ulcers and tension headache.

I noted that irritable bowel syndrome is often connected with lack of self-confidence, feeling of a danger and helplessness in difficult life situations.

In turn, duodenal ulcers disease is followed by emotional secrecy, restraint in showing one's experiences, problems with the giving and receiving process on the level of feelings and, as a result,

a sense of injustice because of under-appreciation. I have founded that people with diagnosed duodenal ulcers often have a tendency to feel resentment for a long time and are not able to let it go, to forgive – this concerns both themselves and other people.

As for tension headache, it frequently causes difficulties in understanding the environment, excessive susceptibility to emotional impulses, discouragement and outbreaks of anger and frustration. As a result, a person is not able to respond adequately to stimuli coming from the outside.

In most cases I come to conclusion that emotional problems of my patients are related to their previous negative experience, causing afterward anxiety-provoking thoughts and destructive defensive mechanisms and behaviours.

Therefore, based upon my practice, discovery of traumas, especially in childhood, and correction of defensive mechanisms can play an important role in improving the emotional comfort of people experiencing psychosomatic diseases.

However, in many cases traditional techniques of psychotherapy, such as word psychotherapy, turn out to be ineffective. According to Dennis Charney, one of the leading experts in neurobiology, traumatized people may have definite changes in brain (Charney, 2013). Charney found that the biology of depression, anxiety disorders and phobias has been linked to a dysfunction of the stress hormone system which influences the brain's circuits and networks involved in the regulation of mood and the natural ability to respond to stress.

Based on my practice, a precious support in this case is innovative psychological therapy Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which was originally designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories.

3. EMDR Method

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy was developed by psychologist Francine Shapiro in the 1980s. Dr Shapiro called this method 'adaptive information processing' (Shapiro, 1995). She found that people can overcome the process of trauma faster when paired with bilateral stimulation. She has elaborated the method to reprocess traumatic information by the brain and create new connections in the memory network (Shapiro, 2001). As many research show, this process facilitates developing cognitive insights, which allow elimination of emotional distress in relation to definite events. Nowadays the EMDR therapy is considered effective treatment used in cases of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, fear, anxieties and phobias.

It should be mentioned that in the beginning of research Francine Shapiro treated Vietnam veterans who were not capable of functioning normally after returning home. They had attacks of

aggression, many fears and phobias, and had big problems with self-identification. Applying EMDR therapy helped them to transform emotionally disturbing material in their memory.

How does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing method work?

Clients were instructed to follow the therapist's fingers with their eyes, moving them to the right and left sides. The eye movement activates both hemispheres of the brain and invokes the processing of the effect. Contemporary studies discover that the brain is able to heal itself of psychological trauma much in the same way our body heals physical trauma. To achieve this, it is necessary to remove the block of an emotional memory and establish new associations between the traumatic memory and more adaptive information. As Laurel Parnell wrote, 'we have a natural healing system that, when accessed and activated using bilateral stimulation, can restore us to balance' (Parnell, 2008).

Results of research indicate that information processing during Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing treatment reduces subjective disturbances and stress reactivity to traumatic memories (Sack, Hofmann, Wizelman, & Lempa, 2008).

During EMDR sessions, patients recall traumatic events in brief sequential doses focusing on external factors proposed by the therapist. Besides lateral eye movement, therapist can use other stimuli such as audio-stimulation and hand-tapping.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy sessions are organized into a three-stage protocol. At the first stage, the patient is focused on past events that are especially disturbing for them. In the second stage, focus is placed on the patient's current life conditions that cause distress and emotional discomfort. On this level internal and external triggers are desensitized. In the third stage, a connection is made with imaginable and desirable visions of future events in relation to stressful circumstances for the patient. At this stage, the patient learns new skills necessary for adaptive functioning and living without previous distress.

Working on traumatic memories, patients often discover unconscious emotions and strong body reactions. In this context, they may reveal the connection between their thoughts, emotions, old memories and physical sensations. This associative process showing the interaction between mind and body may liberate them from painful memories and negative emotions.

Applying to my practice as a clinical psychologist, thanks to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy used for psychosomatic patients I fixed several cases of physical abuse in childhood, a number of cruel psychological treatment, painful memories related to severe and lost-lasting disease and death of parents and emotional problems linked to experienced betrayal.

It should be noted that our worst memories often hide our previous negative experiences and unconscious traumas. That is why one woman perceives a husband's leaving as an unpleasant moment in life, while another woman views it as a tragic event and as a result, she obtains a strong

tension headache. In this case, it would be useful to conduct EMDR sessions that allow an understanding of the true reason of the woman's desperation. Sometimes the departure of the husband returns her back to unconscious feeling of insecurity and being abandoned. In my practice Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy revealed forgotten memories of a woman when she was 6 years old and was lost by her father in an unknown town. At that moment she felt not only strong fear, but also deep mortification in her attitude towards her father. Her memory recorded feelings of danger and helplessness, which haunted her at difficult moments in her life, especially in relationships with men. Thanks to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy sessions painful memories of my patient lost their meaning, reducing with time her tension headache. As I mentioned earlier, I deal with such chronic psychosomatic diseases, as irritable bowel syndromes, *duodenal* ulcers and tension headache. In these cases physical conditions of patients strongly depends on their ability to manage stress and anxiety in daily life.

I come to conclusion that the results of the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy become more powerful and long-lasting, when I include psychological diagnostics performed with the use of modern methods and devices.

4. Activaciometr and BIOTEST devices

One of the innovative non-invasive devices for psychological diagnostics is the Activaciometr, which was created as a result of over 30-years of experience of a team of Russian scientists (Tcagarelli,2009). The Activaciometr, by measuring specific physical parameters, enables conclusions to be drawn relating the strength – weakness of the central nervous system, its lability, psychoemotional stability and sensitivity. One of the methods consists of explaining the leading thinking processes, which correspond to the dominance of one of the brain hemispheres. Each hemisphere dominates in controlling different functions. Brain researchers ascribe to the right hemisphere a holistic (comprehensive) and intuitive way of cognition in contradiction to a more rational and analytical functioning of the left hemisphere – usually one of the hemispheres is dominant. This is important for the understanding of the way of communication between a person and the external world. It helps in interpersonal contacts and discovering the stimuli that cause specific emotional and physiological reactions. With the use of the device Activaciometr, it is possible to diagnose, apart from the functional asymmetry of the hemispheres, the degree of one's self-control in extreme situations and the predisposition to undertake risks. Methods applied in that device are also directed towards definition of psycho-emotional stress, which depends on many factors including the strength-weakness of the nervous system and its lability.

I have proved that Activaciometr can be effectively used to diagnose and correct the psychological comfort (understood as an optimum functional condition) of a person.

BIOTEST is another modern device that I use in my work with psychosomatic patients. It is especially helpful for evaluation of effects of EMDR sessions. Biotest records photoplethysmography of heart rate from a sensor-clip placed on a finger. It analyses data from signals of the cardiac contractility's pulse wave, based upon traditional methods of oriental medicine and diagnostic methods of a person's state, depending on heart rate variability. This device allows checking stress intensity level and adaptability of organism of patients.

It is important to stress that both Activaciometr and Biotest device provide precise repeatable results within a short time. In my practice I use also 'Express-Portrait' technology, which assess the main psycho-physiological features of a person on the basis of his/her photograph. The program correlates with the method of defining Mayers Briggs psychotype (test MBTI).

5. Conclusions

Indeed, there are more innovative methods for reducing stress and anxiety of psychosomatic patients and improving comfort of their daily life. One of them is, for instance, neuro feedback, which I also have involved as training of brain function, in the psychological therapy since 2016. I find that neuro feedback method encourages psychosomatic patients to look with compassion at the ways in which their brains act out, and helps them to observe to the intimate connection between mind and body.

It is obvious that the healing process requires a lot of energy, that's why sick people need to keep a quiet mind, cheerful spirit and strong belief in successful recovery. It is important for them to create space without the pressure to act, where they can feel comfortable and confident about their life decisions. The healing process needs personal development planning, which can help person to reach his/her full potential. Our self-identity is a key factor in defining the areas of our life, which are meaningful and inspirational for us. When we are capable to answer the question that we are, then we will know what to do. Our self-identity defines subconsciously the course of our being, including our physical and emotional health (Bialek, 2014).

I believe that each of us has the potential for self-recovery; the main task of psychologist is to help patients to access to their inner resources. As my practice shows, the combination of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy EMDR and innovative psychological diagnostics followed by neuro feedback method holds a lot of possibilities for psychosomatic patients.

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