

Psychological treatment in a patient with chronic pain: working towards acceptance

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Introduction

Emerging evidence in chronic pain treatment supports the efficacy of psychological interventions based mainly on two processes: acceptance and values-based action [1]. The goal is to help patients to reduce the emotional distress and function better, even while pain persists. An exhaustive evaluation of the pain experience is needed to understand as well as the accompanying emotions [2]. A curious and open minded attitude is encouraged to help chronic pain patients re-adapt to their new health reality they have to face. This adaptation process includes changes they have to make in their family, work and social roles.

Objective

Description of a clinical case that shows the efficacy of an integrative therapeutic approach guided by an acceptance and commitment principles.

Evaluation and treatment

48 year old woman with pain since 2009, that became chronic and debilitating after surgery in 2011.

In 2013, she is referred for psychological treatment for continuous, uncontrolled genital pain.

The evaluation consisted of clinical interviews and the review of records of daily pain experience (including type of pain, level of intensity, strategies to cope and the short and long term efficacy of each one)[2].

We want to highlight two key aspects:

1. The patient's relationship to the chronic pain experience and the consequences associated with it. Usually we can distinguish four main types' reactions: denial, fight, resignation, and/or acceptance.
We also evaluate the three-level response system toward the pain experience itself (behavior, emotion and cognition) and the degree of concordance between them.
2. The level of motivation to make objective changes in some specific habits and/or thoughts, to better adapt to a life with chronic pain.
The work on those two axes was the core of the treatment process with the patient. Strategies of Motivational Interviewing were applied during the whole treatment.

Results

The patient reports and provides concrete data that shows her progressive adaptation to her new life with the chronic pain.

Psychotherapy role-playing exercises with figures shows how the chronic pain patient “felt/feels/wish to feel” within her relationship map at different times. Positive evolution can be observed: from feeling like the leader of the group, to recognizing her vulnerability, to finally reaching the feeling of belonging to the group, not the “rescuer” as she used to act, and not the “victim” as she sometimes has felt.



Fig. 1. Past time (before surgery)



Fig. 2. Present time (at the middle-end of the psychological treatment)



Fig. 3. Future time

Conclusions

From the case study presented we have learnt:

1. The importance of making an exhaustive and collaborative evaluation of the patient's pain experience, including the different strategies she uses to cope with chronic pain and its short and long-term implications.
2. The necessity of motivation to make specific changes to better adapt to her new life reality.

The patient, after a year and a half of treatment, takes better self-care through attending to present experiences, and engage in meaningful activities.

Bibliography

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