

PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR TREATING ANXIETY MEL BORINS M.D. F.C.F.P

The Ontario Health Insurance Plan Fee Schedule defines PSYCHOTHERAPY as "any form of treatment for mental illness, behavioural maladaptions, that are assumed to be of an emotional nature, in which a physician deliberately establishes a professional relationship with a patient for the purposes of removing, modifying, or retarding existing symptoms, or attenuating or reversing disturbed patterns of behaviour, and of promoting positive personality growth and development." ⁱ

Before starting psychotherapy it is imperative to perform a complete physical exam, as well as appropriate blood tests to rule out pheochromocytoma, hypoglycemia, Addison's disease, hyperthyroidism, caffeine and drug abuse, drug withdrawal states, as well as side effects to medical drugs. If more than a few sessions are planned then a detailed psychiatric history should be taken including details of physical and sexual abuse, abandonment, family disruptions, loss of loved ones, accidents and operations, mental health problems in family members and other relevant psychosocial, family and personal history.

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY

There are many schools of psychotherapy, each with their own philosophies and techniques.ⁱⁱ No matter what the approach, the patient needs to be given an explanation about the pathophysiology of anxiety. Stresses, traumas, life events impact on the body through the autonomic nervous system via hormones and neurotransmitters. As the body prepares for the "fight or flight

response", physical, and chemical changes take place. Imagine you are walking down a dark, isolated alley late at night and a mugger with a large knife approaches you. You dilate your pupils; tighten your throat; tense your upper back and raise your shoulders; lock your diaphragm and your breathing becomes more shallow; your heart speeds up; tighten your arms and hold your pelvis more rigid; contract the flexor muscles in your legs; shift blood away from your skin and internal organs to your skeletal muscles; get butterflies in your stomach and you urinate and defecate in your pants. When the mugger runs away, then a reversal of all these physiological changes take place and you return to feeling normal. However if you are bombarded everyday with stresses, fears, confrontations from your boss, spouse, children and bank manager then these autonomic system changes persists and you may walk around as if you are being threatened all the time. Human beings all experience basic emotions of love, hate, guilt, anger, jealousy, joy and sadness. Each feeling has a subsequent biochemical and physiological affect on the body. If these feelings are kept inside and not expressed they can cause symptoms mediated through the autonomic nervous system. Explaining the pathophysiology helps patients understand the mind body connection.

RELAXATION

Every family physician should be able to teach a progressive relaxation exercise to their patients. This could be put on tape

tailored to the patient's problem, rehearsed each visit and practiced daily at home.ⁱⁱⁱ The relaxation exercise could include breathing awareness, progressive muscle relaxation, as well as a visualization or guided imagery of a comfortable relaxing scene from the past involving visual, auditory and kinesthetic input.^{iv} It could then be used as a hypnotic induction to do desensitization for phobias, ego strengthening to build self-esteem or age regression to reframe serious traumas of the past.

CREATIVE LISTENING

Many patients need someone to listen to them in a non-judgemental, supportive, empathetic way. Even without any formal post-graduate training in psychotherapy you still can help to deal with acute situational disturbances like the death of loved ones, marital break-ups, loss of employment or other life's transitions. You can be a good creative listener-"a big ear", playing back to the patient the essence of what is said, reflecting content and affect. Carl Rogers postulated "empathy", "unconditional regard", and "genuineness" as necessary conditions for psychotherapy.^v Dr. Stan Greben in his book "Love's Labours"^{vi} talks about six attributes that are important to be found in a therapist. They are "empathetic concern, respectfulness, realistic hopefulness, self-awareness, reliability, and strength."

Asking sensitive questions, dealing with negative self-esteem, removing guilt, helping patients express feelings in constructive ways, uncovering past traumas and helping to mobilize their own

resources, can help support someone over a crisis and strengthen them after the crisis has passed.

BEHAVIOUR THERAPY

Behaviour therapy suggests that anxiety is a learned habit that has been environmentally re-enforced. Through education, practical advice, problem-solving, desensitization, progressive relaxation, positive and negative re-enforcements symptoms are removed. A cognitive version is the technique of thought stopping. The patient is taught to identify and put into words the anxiety producing thoughts and belief systems that create the anxious feelings. The false beliefs are then attacked, disputed and new more positive, sensible, and affirmative beliefs are practiced. Empowerment, assertiveness, eliminating "shoulds", and reframing are emphasized. Biofeedback is still used in specialized centres to teach patients how to modify their symptoms physiologically. Asking patients to keep a journal of thoughts, feelings, and dreams can provide insight and awareness.

EXPERIENTIAL

Experiential Therapies develop the patient's self-awareness of bodily sensations, postures, tensions, and movements with an emphasis on somatic processes. ^{vii} Performing dreams, psychodrama, acting out fantasies, entering into dialogues with parts of oneself, are some of the techniques used to bring the patient into moment to moment awareness of the "here-and-now". There is an emphasis on feelings, spontaneity and getting the patient to stop

intellectualizing which is often seen as a defence for feeling and experiencing.

NEGATIVE THINKING

Sometimes catastrophizing is a habitual way of thinking passed on from a parent. Patients internalize their parent's critical, self-defeating, self-deprecating, severe, judgemental voice. Because they carry around this internalized degrading voice they can feel chronically anxious. The issue of negative self-esteem can often be central to anxiety disorders. Resolution of this persistent negative self-image allows people to feel positively about themselves and the future.

DIET AND EXERCISE

Often exercise and diet manipulation can assist in symptom removal. An exercise program involving brisk walking, cycling, swimming, dancing, aerobics, or racket sports gets the patient out of the house, and helps release internalized frustrations. The elimination of alcohol, coffee, chocolates, colas and sugar as well as regular spaced meals can sometimes improve symptoms.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Schedule patients for psychotherapy in a sound-proofed room where you can ensure you will be on time and not interrupted. Often an emotional problem emerges in the middle of an appointment scheduled for a minor assessment and there is no time available to deal with the complexity of the issues. Manage the acute situation

and arrange for a followup appointment in one of your psychotherapy slots for a half or full hour. Clarify there is no danger of homicide or suicide and even see the patient for another short appointment next day if a longer session cannot be arranged within a comfortable time for the patient.

A patient's motivation, their resistance to your intervention, the transference and countertransference aspects of therapy are of primary importance. Sometimes working on one's own psychological issues helps the clinician to better able to understand and help someone else in their development. It is often helpful to receive further training in the techniques and art of psychotherapy.

Agrophobia, and obsessive compulsive disorders often need more long-term specialized treatment. Phobias, panic disorders and post traumatic stress syndrome can be managed well with hypnosis and behaviour therapy. Situational and generalized anxiety respond to relaxation, psychodynamic and experiential therapy as well as creative listening. "Talking therapy" can be a rewarding and important part of our armamentarium for treating anxiety.

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