

Patients with anxiety think they have more physiological problems than they really have

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A doctoral thesis carried out at the University of Granada, Spain, has proved that patients with serious anxiety disorders (panic disorder with and without agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder or generalized anxiety disorder) think they suffer more physiological (palpitations, sweating, irregular breathing, shaking of the hands and muscular tension...) than they really have. In other words, although many patients with anxiety disorders have orally reported very intense physiological symptoms in surveys and questionnaires, they are hyporeactive when real measures of such symptoms are taken through physiological tests.

This research work has been carried out by Professor M^a Isabel Viedma del Jesus and supervised by dirigida Professors Jaime Vila Castellar and M^a Carmen Fernández- Santaella, of the department of Personality, Evaluation and Physiological Treatment. It was carried out with 83 patients who had been diagnosed any of the following anxiety disorders: panic disorder with and without agoraphobia, social anxiety, generalized anxiety and specific phobias. They all were looked after in the of "Evaluation and Treatment of Anxiety Disorders" of the Clinical Psychology Unit of the Faculty of Psychology.

Less serious patients

This work has also revealed that those patients who suffer a less serious anxiety disorder, such as those who have been diagnosed specific phobias (excessive and irrational fear irracional of a certain object or situation,

such as certain animals, blood or open wounds, heights, storms, closed spaces...) show a high reactivity in the physiological tests. Viedma stresses the existence of relationship between the capacity to react physiologically and the prognosis of therapeutic success, as it is patients with specific phobias who benefit most of the cognitive- behavioural treatment. Therefore, we can state that the presence of physiological symptoms is a good improvement predictor in anxiety disorder patients.

Prevalencie in society

In accordance with the researcher, anxiety disorders are the most prevalent psycho-pathological problem in European countries. According to US statistics, the prevalence of specific phobias ranges between 8.8 and 12.5% of the general population. Although few of the persons who show specific fears come into the category of phobic, nearly 11% of such people have fears serious enough to affect their lives significantly.

The researcher emphasizes that, in the light of the results of her research work, it has been proved that, in the clinical evaluation of pathological anxiety should not only undergo cognitive-behavioural tests (traditionally consisting of surveys and questionnaires), but also psycho-physiological tests. "Our research work –M^a Isabel Viedma says- has important clinical implications with regard to the diagnose and prognosis of therapeutic success, as well as in the design of more effective intervention strategies in the field of anxiety disorders".

Part of the conclusions of this research work have been recently presented in national and international conferences such as those organized by the "Spanish Society of Psychophysiology" (SEPF) and the "Society for Psychophysiological Research" (SPR), among others.

Source: Universidad de Granada

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