THE ROLE OF ATTENTION IN THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRONIC PAIN

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INTRODUCTION / AIM

In the recent decades the research in the pain field has been witnessing a radical shifting the understanding of what pain is. For 300 years we have been treating pain based on the Cartesian specificity theory, where pain is an input to the nervous system, correlated with the state of the tissues. The modern understanding of pain, based on the neuromatrix theory, shows that pain is an output of the brain, based on the brain's interpretation that the organism is under threat, regardless of the state of the tissues and its sensorial inputs. Thus, nociception and pain are separate phenomena. What separate them are cognitive, emotional, sensorial inputs along with stress and motor outputs (Melzack, 1989). In light of this new paradigm, cognitive interventions are becoming more and more relevant. The aim of this paper is to discuss the benefits and caveats of distraction as a pain coping strategy and its alternatives, involving techniques that direct attention to the body and its sensations, as well as to stress and motor responses and cognitive and emotional aspects that occur along the pain experience.

METHODS

Literature Review

RESULTS

Distraction- diverting attention away from the body and from pain- is supported by the literature as an effective coping strategy for pain - especially acute pain. However, when it comes to persistent pain, the more recent literature shows that distraction should be used with caution, for at least three reasons: a) one can not be distracted the whole time; b) distraction can feed some maladaptive coping strategies, such as confrontation of pain; c) distraction can decrease pain during pain-inducing activities, but lead to greater post-activity pain. On the other hand, many studies support the use of techniques that direct attention to the body during pain- including the painful area and its concomitant experiences- guarding responses, stress responses, along with cognitive and emotional responses. Those techniques range from sensory discrimination trainings, targeting somato-cortical organization, to mindfulness meditation and somatic practices- including yoga and eutony- leading to an integrative approach of all the aspects of the neuromatrix.

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSIONS

Because distraction is so effective in pain relief, it can be both an enemy and an ally (Moseley, 2003). Techniques that teach people living with chronic pain to direct their attention to their bodies and their sensations, thoughts and feelings, during pain, can also be effective in pain relief, enabling these people to be less reactive to their pain and consequently, less afraid of it. We conclude that, regardless of the target of attention, the quality of attention is very important.

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While there are some qualities of attention that lead to more anxiety and worry about the result of the pain experience, contemplative attentional practices may offer people living with persistent pain the possibility of being agents in their processes, enhancing their internal locus of control and their sense of self-efficacy.

**OTHER AUTHORS**

Neil Pearson