

Forskning

Anne Grete Hersoug

Oslo

First Experimental Study of Transference Work in Teenagers (FEST-IT).

Main results

The background for this Norwegian research project was to explore the patient-therapist relationship (that is, transference work) in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. The hypothesis was that depressed adolescents would have better long-term effects from psychoanalytic psychotherapy with than without transference work.

The study investigated 69 depressed adolescent (16 to 18 years) who were recruited in health authority funded out-patient clinics in Oslo and Vestfold County, Norway. They were randomized to 28 weeks of treatment with psychoanalytic psychotherapy with or without transference work. The level of depression was measured at the same time points and during therapy (week 12, and 20). The adolescents do not by themselves discuss the therapeutic relationship or alliance, they need to be invited to do so. The exploration of oneself in relation to the therapist, may comprise a balance between autonomy and acknowledgment, as well

acceptance of oneself, which would be of importance for relieving depressive symptoms.

What were the results?

The 69 adolescents were treated with (N=39) or without (N=31) transference work. The mean number of sessions was 18.6 (SD=8,6) in the transference work group and 18.0 (SD=10.9) in the non-transference work group. Both groups showed large and significant improvement on Psychodynamic Functioning Scale – the primary

outcome measure - during the whole study period. The difference between the two groups was not significant during the treatment period (95% CI -0.79 to 1.2 , $p = .674$, $F = .18$), or from post-treatment to one-year follow-up (95% CI -0.13 to $.96$; $p = .134$; $F = 2.3$).

For the secondary outcome measures the transference work group had significantly better outcomes from 12 weeks in treatment to one-year follow-up (Beck Depression Inventory, 95% CI -1.7 to $-.14$, $p = .022$; Montgomery and Åsberg Depression Rating Scale, 95% CI -1.6 to $-.23$, $p = .009$). A central finding was that for depressive symptoms, differential change largely occurred at post-treatment. Although it would have been desirable, no adolescents from minority populations were referred to the study, and few boys were also referred, hence there are generalizability issues.

Løvgren and colleagues interviewed adolescents after transference work and non-transference work therapies, and found that the depressed adolescents reported the importance of the patient-therapist relation as helpful, characterised by an experience of confidence and trust in a supportive therapist. Could it be, that this experience is enhanced when the therapist invites the youngster to explore their feelings, including the negative ones, towards the therapist? Within psychodynamic theory, one aspect of depression is thought to be misplaced aggression directed inwards. When the therapist invites the adolescent to criticize, express annoyance or frustration directed towards the therapist, it might assist to identify aggressive feelings that are not only directed towards self. This would be expected to reduce the depressive hold on the adolescent mind. According to Løvgren and colleagues, working with the relation to the therapist in the here and now also gave the adolescents an opportunity to explore the ongoing relationship, helping them to separate their inner world from outer reality something which is diluted while depressed, and to practice relational skills. Both may precede the reduction in depressive symptoms observed.

Summary

The findings suggest that exploration of the adolescents' relations to the therapist amplify the effects of short-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy

on their depressive symptoms for adolescents with a Major Depressive Disorder. The level of depression decreased significantly more among the depressed adolescents in the transference work than the non-transference work group from mid-therapy (session 12) to 1 year post therapy when measured with the patient-rated BDI and the therapist- and evaluator rated MADRS. When the therapists encouraged adolescents to discuss their thoughts and feelings towards the therapist in the here and now (transference work), the young person improved significantly more on symptom measures.

References

- Ulberg, R., Hummelen, B., Hersoug, A.G. et al. (2021). The first experimental study of transference work-in teenagers (FEST-IT): a multi-centre, observer- and patient-blind, randomised controlled component study. *BMC Psychiatry* 21, 106.
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