

Understanding Anxiety

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Abstract

Anxiety can be defined as “An unpleasant emotion triggered by anticipation of future events, memories of past events, or ruminations about the self (Gale Encyclopedia, 2012, p. 42). Cognitive behavioral therapy is the most well-known therapy and often considered the most successful type of treatment for anxiety disorders. This paper will explore different methods of treatment for anxiety in comparison to cognitive behavioral therapy in an effort to provide those who suffer from anxiety with the most successful interventions and treatments available, not just what is mainstreamed. Treatment methods such as meditation, yoga, prayer, and applied relaxation will be explored using a comparative analysis of previous research. These methods have been selected primarily because they all include natural anxiety coping mechanisms that can be tailored to meet the needs of those with anxiety. All participants being measured in these studies are adults (18-65 years old) and not all participants have diagnosed anxiety disorders. These methods will be observed by examining and comparing studies compiled by other researchers, and exploring other statistics and data. The goal of this research is not to discourage individuals from participating in traditional talk therapy, but rather to allow everyone to find the best method available for them. The first rule of therapy is to do no harm, and providing individuals with unbeneficial treatment may be harmful.

Introduction

Many therapists and mental healthcare professionals use Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a solution to Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and other types of anxiety disorders. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA, 2015), Generalized Anxiety Disorder can be defined as one who has persistent and unnecessary worry on more days than not, frequent tension, and has deep concerns about things they cannot control. This disorder affects adults and children, but for the purpose of this paper, adults (of all ages) will be the focal point. This disorder is primarily treated with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) because it has been the most successful and well-known treatment method thus far. However, there are a number of other qualified treatment methods that the general public has not been taught. The purpose of the exploration of these methods is not to discredit CBT, but to shine a light on other treatments previously kept in the dark. There is no category that every person fits into because no two people are exactly the same. So why would this one particular treatment method be the most wide-

spread and most used among healthcare professionals? Those with GAD and other anxiety disorders are not being educated about other methods that may benefit them more.

Significance

This research is important because this is a disorder that has the potential to reach everyone. Direct causes are unknown, but research indicates that potential causes are biological factors, genetics, and stressful life events (Generalized Anxiety Disorder, 2015). This is not something people choose, or something that is contagious; it can be brought on by stress. A disorder this easily produced must be studied, because, although this is not a terminal illness, it is potentially something a person must live with for the rest of their life. The ADAA (2015) explains that this is a disorder that affects 6.8 million adults in any given year and that women have twice the risk of experiencing this disorder as men. Those who do not have anxiety or an anxiety disorder do not necessarily understand how extensive the impact is on a person's life. This disorder has the potential to crawl into the deepest crevices of a person's subconscious and

to make them over-analyze, over worry, and become scared into a state of anxiety.

Background and Effects of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Jacofsky, Santos, Khemklani-Patel, Neziroglu (2013) researched the biological factors involved in the manifestation of anxiety disorders. Research indicates that genetic components to anxiety may be traced back to different temperaments in babies, and those who are extra-sensitive or emotional at that stage have a better chance of developing anxiety later in life. These researchers also claim that neuroticism plays a key role with anxiety. Neuroticism is, simply put, negatively interpreting events, environmental cues, etc. So, someone who has high neuroticism is also more likely to have an anxiety disorder. This research is not saying that anyone who is negative will have anxiety, just that those who interpret events as negative more often than not, change their brain chemistry a little more each time they think that way, giving them more potential for developing an anxiety disorder. Some people misinterpret the word “anxiety” and link it to “fear” or “panic” or other types of disorders. Researchers explain that “the difference between fear and anxiety is that fear is a reaction to a danger presently detected in the environment, while anxiety refers to the anticipation of some potential threat that may or may not happen in the future” (Jacofsky, Santos, Khemklani-Patel, Neziroglu, 2013). These researchers go on to say that just because there is a concrete difference between fear and anxiety does not mean that our bodies perceive that difference. Once our brains identify something as a potential threat, our bodies react. That’s where our basic biology of adrenaline, norepinephrine, and other stress hormones comes into play.

The New York Times’s editor and MD, Harvey Simon (2013) explains GAD as having three or more symptoms, most days, for at least six months: restlessness, tiredness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, tension in muscles, and lack of sleep or disturbed sleep. These are symptoms that have great potential for impairing

a person’s normal functioning. This is not just a disorder that affects a person’s functioning; it also affects that person’s family/loved ones. Without treatment best suited to the individual, this could change a person’s life and negatively affect them and their family in the long term.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a Mainstream Solution

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of therapy molded by techniques pioneered by Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis. In the simplest terms, Corey explains it as “CBT is based on the assumption that a reorganization of one’s self-statements will result in a corresponding reorganization of one’s behavior” (p. 275). This technique is so popular because it incorporates ideas from cognitive therapy and behavioral therapy, and is just about the easiest to integrate into other types of therapy. CBT uses various methods like operant conditioning, modeling, behavior rehearsal, client homework, etc. CBT is perhaps one of the most popular types of therapy because it is essentially a hybrid therapy.

Ellis created Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), which promotes the significant connection between a person’s thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, and the “cause and effect” relationship of those connections (Corey, 2009, p. 275). The idea behind this therapy is that, while a person is born with capabilities for self-preservation and self-actualization, that person is also born with self-destructive tendencies and other less beneficial qualities. The therapeutic relationship between client and therapist for Ellis is one of teacher and student, Ellis believed that a client was there to learn. In this therapy an A-B-C framework was used to establish A (client’s activating event), B (their belief), and C (their emotional and behavioral consequence), leading to D (disputing intervention), E (effect), and finally, F (new feeling) (Corey, 2009, p. 278). Looking at this method in the specific case of a client with generalized anxiety disorder, the therapist would break down their disorder into these steps. For example, “A” what event or activity triggers their

anxiety, “B” what irrational belief they are accepting as true, “C” how they feel after anxiety takes over and what immediately follows the anxiety attack, “D” this client then learns how to detect, debate, and discriminate irrational beliefs, “E” this client gains a new belief that works in a healthy positive manor, and “F” this client gets a new set of feelings (Corey, 279). This method works for anxiety because it is a collaboration between client and therapist, and the client is given someone with the correct tools to help them learn how to manage their disorder.

Beck’s Cognitive therapy is similar to REBT in the sense that its premise is to recognize and change negative thoughts and beliefs. Beck created a list of “cognitive distortions” many people have that enable their irrational beliefs and thinking (Corey, 2009, p. 289). The purpose of identifying these cognitive distortions is to show the client how irrational they are and to have the client test their own beliefs, leading to the formation of healthier and less dysfunctional thinking. The therapists work closely with the clients in an emotional relationship with trust; the client works actively with the therapist instead of a teacher-student relationship. This type of therapy was originally created while Beck was researching depression, however, when applied with behavior therapy, a new solution to anxiety emerged.

CBT was born to help those with anxiety. It uses a bond between the therapist and client to find a technique best suited to treat the client’s anxiety. For Generalized Anxiety Disorder CBT helps by identifying the negative thoughts of the client, helping the client challenge those negative thoughts, and enabling them to create new and healthier thoughts. This method is the most commonly used for GAD because it has a variety of techniques that fit most people. Operant conditioning works by helping the client identify a behavior that needs to be changed, and reinforcing only a desired behavior. So eventually the client learns to only reinforce the behavior(s) that they want instead of the previously reinforced negative response of anxiety. Modeling works by clients identifying

what their desired behavior looks like and practicing it. Behavior rehearsal is similar to modeling; the therapist asks the client to practice certain behavioral patterns, until they are ready to implement these new patterns in social settings. In homework the therapist and client work together in a session to identify what needs to be worked on and what step the client would be willing to take by themselves outside of the session, the client then reports back to the therapist any progress made. These techniques are generalized to fit the needs of most people, and typically there is something that fits a client’s needs. However, that does not mean that there isn’t a better therapy or method out there to treat a person’s specific case of anxiety.

Meditation as an Alternative for Anxiety

Meditation has proven to be a powerful substitute for anxiety. David Watson and Roland Tharp wrote “Self-Directed Behavior”, a book about behavior and how to monitor and change behavior. A key component to behavior change, according to Watson and Tharp, is substituting new thoughts and behaviors for the old, undesired ones (p. 196). In doing so, one must create distracting behaviors, so when the anxiety starts to intervene in one’s daily life, the person implements a distracting behavior to focus on instead. The use of distracting behaviors is temporary, but it is a part of the behavior change process. Through the use of distracting behaviors, a client is then able to partially control the emotions they associate with that behavior. By actively choosing to participate in an alternative behavior, the client then takes away some of the power over them that anxiety held. After the use of distracting behaviors, one identifies a list of incompatible behaviors. Incompatible behaviors are behaviors that physically do not allow a client to participate in their undesired behavior.

So if the undesired behavior is anxiety, a client could use meditation. Meditation is an easy, simple technique that costs little to nothing to do. A person with anxiety would not need to pay a therapist if he or she knew of effective

meditation techniques to do in place of anxiety. J.C. Smith identified such techniques; sitting in a quiet room and focusing on your breathing, identifying a mantra and thinking it slowly, letting the thoughts pour into your head while saying the mantra, not trying to problem solve and instead letting the thoughts drift and the mantra relax those thoughts. It sounds easy and perhaps ineffective, but for some people meditation is more effective than CBT or talking to someone about their anxiety.

Anxiety, Self-Actualization, and Meditation

Fabrizio Coppola and David Spector researched natural stress relief meditation as a means for reducing anxiety and increasing self-actualization. Their hypothesis is that individuals who participate in natural stress relief meditation will experience a lasting decreased anxiety and an increase in positive feelings such as self-actualization, creativity, and autonomy (Coppola & Spector, 2009, 309). This study was located in Italy, and included 31 participants. The participants were given the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, which according to the American Psychological Association, is a 40 item questionnaire used to distinguish anxiety from depression. Participants took this questionnaire three times; the week before meditation instruction, following meditation instruction, and after four weeks of meditation. Participants were also given the Short-Index of Self-Actualization (SISA), which measured the participants' levels of self-actualization using a 4-point Likert Scale. SISA was given to participants immediately after they were instructed on meditation and four weeks into practicing it regularly.

This study included no control group, so results are based solely on the experimental study. Results indicate a significant difference in anxiety and self-actualization after treatment. According to the STAI, participants' anxiety levels were within the same 1% before and during instruction, and dropped 6% after four weeks of the natural stress relief meditation. Self-actualization results were also significant,

with more than 2% of participants showing an increase in self-actualization.

This study has its faults, sample size being one of them. However, no matter how small the increase in self-actualization or decrease in anxiety, that is progress. Those participants came into the study more anxious and less self-actualized and left it a little better. No matter how small the population or how small the decrease, natural stress relief meditation can be beneficial in reducing an individual's anxiety. This is a technique that should be explored in future research. This won't necessarily help everyone, but a few people being helped is enough.

Learning Applied Relaxation Techniques

Applied relaxation is similar to meditation, in that it is essentially a person learning to calm down and relax their body. According to Watson and Tharp (2009), "relaxation is the casting off of nervous tension and anxiety" (p. 174), so in the context of using the concept of relaxation to cure anxiety, one would do so simply by applying it. This is another method to control and lessen anxiety that many assume is too simplistic to actually work. Applied relaxation allows a person to breathe deeply, exhaling all anxiety or burdens, and releasing all tension. There are actually a variety of relaxation techniques to help those with anxiety, but authors stress that it isn't the type of relaxation that is important, but the amount that a person practices it. By finding something as easy as a different way of breathing or a relaxing pose, those with anxiety are being given a simple and clear way to help themselves.

Eleanor Donegan and Michael Dugas (2010) did a study on Generalized Anxiety Disorder treatments, CBT versus applied relaxation. For this study, the CBT protocol was for participants to receive psychoeducation and worry awareness training, and the applied relaxation protocol consisted of participants receiving psychoeducation and tension awareness training. Worry awareness training typically involves the participant keeping a daily record of stimuli that cause them worry, so if during the day such stimuli appear the individual may be prepared.

Tension awareness training involves participants acknowledging when their anxiety takes on the physical manifestation of tension. Donegan and Dugas examined these conditions to see if there would be a change in a participant's amount of worry leading to a decrease in their somatic anxiety over time, or vice versa, the same way for the CBT condition and the applied relaxation condition. The CBT condition had 31 participants and the applied relaxation condition had 26 participants. The experiment lasted 12 weeks, with weekly sessions for both groups. Participants completed daily questionnaires about worry and somatic anxiety, along with a pretest and posttest. Results indicated there was no statistically significant differences in which treatment method was more successful in treating GAD, meaning that both treatment methods are comparable. If the treatments are comparable, then why hasn't applied relaxation been explored more thoroughly?

Yoga and Anxiety

Yoga is another excellent tool for managing anxiety. Yoga, by definition is "an ancient Indian combination of techniques, which includes physical postures, regulated breathing, meditation, as well as certain philosophical principles" (Telles et al., 2012, p. 963), and is looked at as a beneficial technique for some in relation to anxiety, stress, depression, etc. This is a technique that can be performed in numerous ways and settings and that is easy for anyone to do. CBS News reporter Parvati Shallow wrote an article in 2015 titled "Is it possible to heal depression and anxiety with yoga?" In this article he interviewed clinical psychologist and yoga instructor Bo Forbes. Forbes explains in the article that in order to treat anxiety, depression, etc. people have to access their mind-body network and alter the negative patterns that have formed in their body systems. He explains that anxiety and depression are the most common mental illnesses in the U.S. and affect more than 40 million Americans. Anxiety is a terrifying disorder that has the power to take over a person's life. If anxiety can be successfully

treated with something as simple as yoga, then it is worth looking into.

Why it Can Work

A study was conducted by Telles et al. in India in 2012 using army soldiers who were asked to participate in a yoga session. Researchers believed that yoga would reduce anxiety and enhance performance in tasks requiring attention, and were able to test this using a group of army recruits and a group of regular non-army men. The sample size included 140 male soldiers, and a comparison group of 20 males. A requirement worth pointing out is that the soldiers must have completed three or more years in the army before participating in this study. There were three groups total. Group one included 70 soldiers and they were required to practice yoga postures and regulated breathing. Group two included 70 soldiers and they sat with their eyes closed and practiced regulated breathing. Group three was the 20 regular men who listened to chanting music with their eyes closed. There was one total session for all three conditions which lasted 45 minutes. There were two assessments given to each group before and after the session. The first being the Digit Substitution Task where participants were given a number sheet 0-9 with a code at the top of the sheet and in a timed period they were asked to create as many number combinations as they could. The second assessment was the State Trait Anxiety Inventory which asked participants 20 questions whose answers were rated using a scale of 1-4. In the yoga condition participants used the Visual Analog Scale which was literally a long scale 0-10 on how they would score their relaxation after the yoga session (0 – not relaxed at all, 10 – extremely relaxed). Results indicate that there was a significant reduction in the participants' overall levels of state anxiety in the yoga condition and in the musical rhythmic chanting condition. However, results for the breath awareness tended to increase anxiety and showed no significance.

The purpose of this exploration into yoga is to illustrate another component of meditation and

relaxing techniques that may work to aid in reducing anxiety. Anxiety is terrifying in that it is a different experience for everyone, it has different effects for everyone, and presumably lasts for different durations of time. If this is a disorder so impossibly different for people, why would one method work for everyone? Yoga and other types of relaxing techniques are considered second rate and thus are not thought of as “real” treatments. In relation to a disorder as complex as anxiety, it would be in the best interest of all of those affected to be knowledgeable of all potential sources of relief.

Religion and Prayer

As defined by the Merriam Webster’s dictionary, “pray” means “To speak to God especially in order to give thanks or to ask for something; to hope or wish very much for something to happen” (“Merriam-Webster”, 2016). Prayer is something that most people use as a method of communication between themselves and God in times of thanksgiving or times of trouble. There are a variety of different religions involving God/higher powers, but for the purposes of this paper Christianity will be explored. Prayer is something hard to measure because of the potential confounding variables involved and thus is something more so to be practiced privately instead of measured in a study. The purpose of this Biblical inclusion is not to persuade or discredit, but to share information and perhaps to shed light on a successful way of managing anxiety.

Gerald Corey (2009) wrote about spirituality and religion in his book “Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy”, and how it is important for counselors and therapists to integrate spirituality and religion into counseling if it is important to the client (p. 454). Corey explains that 92% of the population identify with a religion and 96% believe in God or a universal spirit (p. 452). Nearly every person believes in a higher power. When praying, as stated previously, one is asking for something or giving thanks. A person’s religion is essentially the foundation to all or most of what they believe, so

to reduce their anxiety, one must first understand their religion and beliefs. In relation to traditional talk-therapy, a therapist must understand the core values that underlie a person before treating them in order to obtain a solidified understanding of what makes them who they are and their beliefs what they are. In relation to treatments for anxiety not involving talk-therapy, an individual with religious beliefs or a relationship with God could simply pray.

Verses That Serve a Purpose

The idea behind praying is to maintain a conversation with God, to ask humbly for the desires of one’s heart and to share things with Him. Everyone prays differently, there is no absolutely correct way to do so. Not everyone believes in God so this will not work for everyone, but for the people who have a relationship with Him, this exploration may serve as a tool to aid them in their path of working through anxiety. Having a relationship with God can be simple; it’s talking with someone everyday about your day and wanting to do better for them every day, it’s believing that things are out of your control. Those who pray do so because once they establish a relationship with God, they can feel Him there, listening, and answering which may bring inner peace to an individual suffering from anxiety.

Praying relieves anxiety for those who let it. For the people who genuinely believe and have faith, praying is all that it may take. One verse that has particularly been seen as beneficial for anxiety is in New Testament, Philippians 4:6,7 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And in the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”. Again, the purpose of this is not to persuade individuals to join Christianity or to discredit the religions of others. For people who believe in God or a higher power, this is one particular method that may help them.

Conclusion

Cognitive behavioral therapy is the most well known and most used treatment method for Generalized Anxiety Disorder and other types of anxiety disorders. Anxiety is something that has the power to reach everyone, so any treatment method that is safe and effective should be considered by therapists and mental healthcare professionals as an option. Instead, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a therapy that has so many versatile components that therapists primarily use this to fit everyone. This method includes a variety of techniques that can reach most people. However, this does not mean every single person with anxiety can be helped by this technique. Other effective methods of treating anxiety disorders include meditation, applied relaxation, yoga, and prayer. These methods are not the most popular because they do not have techniques for most people, but they may be much more beneficial for someone with anxiety, if that

person were informed they were options. Further investigation into these methods might include researching further into meditation, applied relaxation and yoga, using larger sample sizes, and perhaps adding an additional independent variable into the study. The problem with studying individuals in terms of prayer as a relief for anxiety is because it's difficult to identify how efficiently one is praying, identifying their relationship with God, etc. Prayer is more of a method to use privately rather than a study to be measured. Anxiety is powerful and can easily grow into a new disorder(s), since the experience and effects can be different for all who suffer from it. These are methods that can be successful, people just need to be educated in them. Therapy is about doing no harm and putting the client first, so if there is something that is easy like meditation or yoga, that someone can do on their own without a therapist, people with anxiety should be given them as an option.

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