

Depression and poetry recitation: breathing better for better outcomes

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I. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

It is commonly believed that mental suffering is associated with higher creativity: while this might hold true for some specific mental disorders, such as bipolar disorder, it is not generally true for unipolar depression (Andreasen, 2008; Andreasen, 2011; Kyaga et al., 2011; Kyaga et al., 2013).

Depressive disorders are characterized by individual suffering, isolation and heightened risk of suicide, especially in the old age. Also depression is characterized by relevant physical symptoms, such as fatigue, disorders of sleep and appetite. Several biological alterations have been established among patients suffering from depressive disorders, including imbalances in stress hormones, autonomic nervous and immune systems. Recent data suggest also that depression is associated with disorders of breathing, particularly during sleep time (Cheng et al., 2013; Deldin et al., 2006).

Besides antidepressant drug therapy and other strategies, physical activity has shown to have some efficacy on the symptoms of depression, even in the elderly (Bridle et al., 2012). Still, this approach despite improving cardiovascular and respiratory capacity, does not necessarily lead to improvements in the breathing movements and efficiency.

As elderly have a higher risk for both depression and pulmonary diseases, we aimed at designing a novel creative strategy to improve breathing function and general outcomes in this population. Our aim was to combine elements pertaining to the psychological, physical and cultural domains.

II. METHODS

Preliminary evidence indicates that the recitation of hexameter verse exerts a strong influence on low-frequency breathing patterns and respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), leading to cardio-respiratory synchronization and improving oxygen intake (Cysarz et al., 2004).

We recruited patients older than 65, suffering from major depressive disorder, recurrent type.

We designed a set of breathing exercises based on the recitation of hexameter poetry, in order to be performed by the patients. Poetry was recited under the guide of a drama teacher. Two types of poetry were used, both with an appropriate hexameter metric, in order to maintain the right breathing rhythm during recitation. 1) poetry by a well known Italian author (G. Carducci); 2) poetry written by young students in the context of a collaborative project with the city's schools (middle schools "Guido Reni" and "Testoni Fioravanti"). Both types were chosen to have a content that would be familiar to patients in order to prompt positive affect and cultural reminiscence.

Sessions of exercises were held weekly, and patients were assessed at baseline and follow up with standardized questionnaires to assess depressive symptomatology, anxiety and well being. Improvements were noted in these domains, and participants' satisfaction was overall high.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Novel creative strategies are needed to address specific symptoms in psychiatric disorders. While pharmacological approaches are often necessary and efficacious, they do not aim to several physical manifestation of depression and lack references to the patients' cultural background. Poetry recitation and exercises aiming at cardio-respiratory synchronization instead seemed to further improve depressive symptoms in older patients, with patients' and physicians' satisfaction.

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