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Orginal Article

Effectiveness of Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy on Object Relations, Anger, and Guilt in Women with Major Depressive Disorder

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Abstract

According to the psychodynamic theory, major depressive disorder (MDD) is caused by a perceived real loss in relationships, leading to anger and guilt towards the other person. Short-term intensive dynamic psychotherapy aims to help patients bring their unconscious emotions to the conscious level, known as "Unlocking the Unconscious". This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of short-term intensive dynamic psychotherapy on objective relationships, anger, and guilt in women with MDD. Regarding the purpose, the present study was of applied type, and in terms of methodology, it was semi-experimental with pre-test - post-test - 3-month follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of all women with MDD who were referred to counseling centers and psychological services in Isfahan in the spring of 2023. A total of 32 women with MDD were

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selected via available sampling and randomly assigned to the experimental group (16 people) and the control group (16 people). Dovanloo's (1995) ISTDP protocol was performed only for the experimental group along 8 sessions of 90 minutes weekly, while the control group was placed on the waiting list. Subjects were evaluated in 3 stages (pre-test, post-test, and 3-month follow-up) through Bell's Object Relation Inventory (BORI), State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory 2 (STAXI-2), kugler and Jones Guilty Feelings 'S Questionnaire (KJGFQ), and Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). Data analysis was undertaken via repeated measures analysis of variance and the Bonferroni post hoc test using SPSS-28 software. According to the results, ISTDP was effective on alienation, insecure attachment, the total score of subjective relationships, internal occurrence of anger, internal control of anger, trait guilt, as well as the total score of guilt and depression symptoms, and up to 3 months after the intervention was stable ($p<0/05$). ISTDP had the greatest impact on depression symptoms ($\eta p^2=0.543$), anger internalization ($\eta p^2=0.436$), and anger internal control ($\eta p^2=0.412$). ISTDP enables patients with depression to access and re-experience repressed anger toward attachment figures. Through this process, along with therapeutic pressure to confront guilt, patients can amend their object relations, reduce guilt, and alleviate depressive symptoms.

Keywords: dynamic psychotherapy; object relations; anger; feel guilty; depression.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a prevalent mental health condition among women and is associated with substantial psychological, familial, social, and economic consequences. From a psychodynamic perspective, depression often arises from perceived or actual relational loss, leading to anger and guilt directed toward significant others. These negative emotions are frequently internalized and redirected toward the self, thereby contributing to depressive symptomatology. Short-term intensive dynamic psychotherapy seeks to help individuals access and articulate unconscious emotional experiences—a process referred to as "unlocking the unconscious." The present study aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of this therapeutic approach on object relations, anger, and guilt in women with MDD. Further, short-term dynamic psychotherapy focuses on identifying maladaptive emotional patterns rooted in early attachment experiences as well as unresolved interpersonal conflicts. By facilitating direct emotional experiencing within the therapeutic alliance, the method aims to diminish defensive functioning and promote healthier emotional regulation as well as interpersonal adaptation.

Methods

This study utilized an applied, semi-experimental design using a pretest–posttest–three-month follow-up structure with a control group. The statistical population consisted of women diagnosed with MDD who attended counseling and psychological service centers in Isfahan during the spring of 2023. Using available sampling, 32 women with MDD were recruited and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n=16) or a control group (n=16). Davanloo's (1995) intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy protocol was delivered exclusively to the experimental group over eight weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, whereas the control group was placed on a waiting list. The participants completed assessments at three time points (pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up) using Bell's Object Relations Inventory (BORI), the State–Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2), the Kugler and Jones Guilty Feelings Questionnaire (KJGFQ), and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc tests in SPSS-28. Inclusion criteria required a clinical diagnosis of MDD, willingness to attend psychotherapy sessions, and absence of severe psychiatric comorbidities such as psychosis or substance use disorders. Confidentiality was assured, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Results

The findings indicated that the short-term psychodynamic intervention significantly lowered alienation, insecure attachment, internalized anger, excessive guilt, and depressive symptoms, with improvements sustained at the three-month follow-up ($p < 0.05$). The intervention yielded the largest effects on depressive symptoms ($\eta p^2 = 0.543$), anger internalization ($\eta p^2 = 0.436$), and internal anger control ($\eta p^2 = 0.412$). The partciicipants in the experimental group exhibited notable improvement to the control group on interpersonal functioning and emotion-regulation indicators. This suggests that the intervention not only alleviated depressive symptoms but also enhanced emotional awareness as well as processing of underlying relational conflicts.

Conclusion

Dynamic psychotherapy is an evidence-based approach that mitigates depressive symptoms by facilitating access to avoided or unconscious emotional states within a secure and empathic therapeutic relationship. Establishing a therapeutic environment grounded in trust, emotional attunement, and psychological safety would enable patients to explore core affective experiences typically defended against owing to anxiety or shame.

From an object relations perspective, depression often involves maladaptive internal representations shaped by earlier attachment disruptions and unresolved relational losses. Through clarification, defense restructuring, and encouragement of deep emotional experiencing, short-term dynamic psychotherapy fosters greater insight, emotional integration, as well as restructuring of internalized relational patterns.

In short-term intensive dynamic psychotherapy, specific emphasis is placed on helping patients identify and experience anger originally directed toward significant attachment figures but subsequently internalized. With the Therapy conceptualizing depression as anger turned inward and accompanied by maladaptive guilt, it focuses on enabling patients to experience anger in a regulated and conscious manner. This process weakens rigid defensive structures, lowers self-punitive tendencies, and helps distinguish realistic responsibility from pathological guilt. As these emotional conflicts are processed, reductions in guilt and self-directed hostility contribute to meaningful improvements in depressive symptoms as well as interpersonal functioning. Overall, this therapeutic modality provides a structured and emotionally focused framework for addressing the core affective and relational mechanisms underlying MDD, particularly among women whose depressive experiences are deeply intertwined with attachment dynamics.

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