Abstract

This study examined whether the promotion of mindfulness in psychotherapists in training can influence the treatment results of their patients. The therapeutic course and treatment results of 196 inpatients, who were treated during a nine week period by nine psychotherapists in training, were compared: in the first phase of the study, the treatment group without (CG, historical control group, \( n = 55 \)), and in the second phase the treatment group with, (MFG, \( n = 58 \)) therapists who were currently practicing Zen meditation. The results of treatment were examined (according to the intent-to-treat principle) with the Session Questionnaire for General and Differential Individual Psychotherapy (STEP), the Questionnaire of Changes in Experience and Behaviour (VEV) and the Symptom Checklist (SCL-90-R), and showed significantly better results in the MFG.

Keywords: Mindfulness; ZEN meditation; Psychotherapists in training

1. Introduction

All psychotherapists need to practice a certain degree of vigilance during therapy [5]. The task is highly complex: a therapist must assess the most subtle verbal and non-verbal cues and simultaneously regulate his or her own reactions [16]. An increased ability to engage in self-reflection and self-regulation, acquired through self-experience, strengthens these abilities [2,7].

In order to further promote these skills, attention exercises that were historically developed in the Buddhist practice of meditation were integrated into psychotherapeutic treatment approaches during the course of the eighties and nineties [12]. Mindfulness is one such method. It understood as a present moment, purposeful and non-judgmental form of directing attention [4].

However, we are not aware of any studies that prospectively examine the direct influence of the promotion of mindfulness in psychotherapists on their patients’ psychotherapeutic results. The authors known to us concentrate exclusively on patient intervention [14,18], or on the indirect effects of enhancing mindfulness in health care professionals and students [9,15].

The aim of this study was to assess whether there are indications that the promotion of mindfulness, through daily Zen meditation, in psychotherapists in training influences the treatment results of their patients.

2. Subjects and methods

2.1. Study general framework and subjects

The study was conducted in 2004/2005 in the Inntalklinik, Simbach am Inn, Germany, a. 200+ bed-psychosomatic hospital and licensed training institution. Psychologists who want to work as psychotherapists in Germany can complete the...
required three year internship here following their university studies. Their patients’ therapeutic results are always evaluated as part of their training.

A homogenous group of psychotherapists in training (PiT) took part in the study. They all had the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in psychology and were in their second year of training. All the patients who were treated by the PiTs at the time of the study were included.

2.2. Assessment

The admission diagnoses were qualified by means of Structured Clinical Interviews (SCID). The questionnaires included socio-demographic data, the Session Questionnaire for General and Differential Individual Psychotherapy STEP [7], the Questionnaire of Changes in Experience and Behaviour VEV [19], and the Symptom Checklist SCL-90-R [11].

The STEP is a German questionnaire that records the various general influencing factors in the psychotherapeutic process from the perspective of the patients. The 12 items directly relate to the experience of a therapy session in an individual setting and form three subscales: K — clarification perspective, P — problem solving perspective and B — relationship perspective. Directly following a therapy session, the patients note on a seven step answer scale whether the respective statement applies (Cronbach’s alpha between $r = .71$ and $r = .91$). The scale’s raw values are transformed into $T$-values.

The VEV is a German questionnaire that quantitatively assesses subjectively perceived changes in experience and behaviour. The questionnaire contains 42 questions on change, which record the subject’s subjectively perceived conditions in comparative form. In validating studies, the variance analysis of the post-test data showed that the differences between the groups were significant on a 0.5% niveau (multiple validity coefficients $r = .72$).

The SCL-90-R measures subjectively perceived impediments through 90 of the person’s physical and psychological symptoms during the previous seven days. Once interpreted, it offers an overview of the person’s emotional and symptomatology, or half lotus position, on a meditation pillow. The Zen training itself was carried out in part as directed (assisted) mediation for focusing attention on breathing and in part in silence without this assistance. The directed mediation was similar to the presumably oldest surviving detailed instructions for meditation, the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing (Anapanasati Sutra, approx. 500 B.C.). It deals with an exercise from Thich Naht Hanh [10].

The meditation took place daily over a nine week period daily (Monday through Friday) from 7:00 to 8:00.

The patients were treated according to an inpatient, integrative psychiatric-psychotherapeutic plan. The treatment involved two individual psychotherapeutic sessions (50 min each), five group therapy sessions (60 min each), two group sessions of gestalt therapy (60 min each), five sessions of group body psychotherapy based on psychoanalysis (60 min each), two sessions of progressive muscle relaxation based on Jacobson (30 min each), and sports and gymnastic groups (totalling 480 min) per week. In addition, where indicated, individual appointments were made for physical therapy, nutritional counselling, or co-therapy and social counselling.

Following each individual therapy session, the patients filled out the STEP questionnaire, and after completion of their inpatient treatment, they filled the VEV form out once. The SCL-90-R was carried out at admission and prior to discharge. No PiTs dropped out.
2.4. Source of funding and ethical considerations

The study was planned and performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, approved by the clinic’s “Ethikkommission”, and was not funded.

2.5. Data analysis

Data from STEP are presented according to the intent-to-treat principle with means, standard deviations and 95% confidence intervals (95%-CI).

For the analysis of the time course for the response values, a (two-level) linear mixed-effects model was used [1,13,17]. Through its fixed effects, this regression model allows assessment of systematic differences between treatments. By means of its random effects, it takes the hierarchic and longitudinal structure of the data (and hence their correlation) into account on the one hand and the possible random variation in the time courses between patients and PiTs on the other. The results from the VEV are portrayed as the difference in the scores and p for the treatment effect.

We employed the statistics software S-PLUS 6.0 of the Data Analysis Products Division of MathSoft, Seattle, Washington/USA, with the “nlme”-library version 3.3.1 for mixed-effects models by Pinheiro and Bates [13].

3. Results

Both groups consisted of approximately 20% men and 80% women. This pronounced overrepresentation of female patients is typical for our psychosomatic hospital. There was no significant difference between the two groups with respect to their duration of treatment. The socio-demographic data from both groups are reproduced in Table 1, and the most frequent psychiatric diseases in Table 2. The two groups were comparable in light of their socio-demographic data, psychiatric diagnoses and initial assessments with SCL-90-R (Table 4).

Table 3 shows the changes on two of three STEP scales. Fig. 1 illustrates the course of the K scale (clarification perspective) on STEP. The linear mixed-effects model showed a significant difference in the average time course in two of three STEP scales (Table 3). There were likewise significant differences between both groups on the VEV [MFG (n = 58): VEV = 230; CG (n = 55): VEV = 210; p < 0.001]. In Table 4, the differences between both groups on the SCL-90-R are presented.

4. Discussion

The comparison of both groups showed a significantly higher assessment of individual therapy (STEP) by patients treated during the time that the PiTs regularly took part in Zen meditation. Following their therapy sessions, the patients in the MFG experienced their progress in understanding of their own psychodynamics, difficulties, and goals as superior. They also made better assessments of their progress in overcoming their difficulties and symptoms, and in developing new behaviours and transferring them into daily life [6,8].

Upon discharge, the subjectively perceived results from the entire inpatient treatment (VEV) were assessed significantly more highly by the MFG patients than the CG [19].

The MFG showed a significantly greater rate of change than did the CG on the GSI and five SCL-90-R scales: Somatization (SOM), Obsessiveness (O-C), Anxiety (ANX), Anger/Hostility (HOS), Phobic Anxiety (PHOB) and Psychoticism (PSYC).

Table 1
Socio-demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MFT n = 58</th>
<th>CG n = 55</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)a</td>
<td>38.1 ± 9.7</td>
<td>39.5 ± 9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in a partnership</td>
<td>31 (53.4%)</td>
<td>30 (54.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar worker</td>
<td>24 (41.4%)</td>
<td>21 (38.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White collar worker</td>
<td>12 (20.7%)</td>
<td>11 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife or House-husband</td>
<td>22 (37.9%)</td>
<td>23 (41.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient psychotherapy</td>
<td>21 (36.2%)</td>
<td>24 (43.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the previous two years</td>
<td>32 (55.2%)</td>
<td>31 (56.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycho-pharmaca</td>
<td>8 (13.8%)</td>
<td>9 (16.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient psychiatry/psychotherapy</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: MFT = the patient group that was treated during the phase in which the therapists practiced Zen meditation; CG = control group (patients who were treated during the phase before Zen meditation began).

a Mean value ± standard deviation.

Table 2
Most frequently diagnosed psychiatric diseases in both groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MFG n = 58</th>
<th>CG n = 55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to severe stress, and adjustment disorders</td>
<td>20 (34.5%)</td>
<td>20 (36.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood disorders</td>
<td>23 (39.6%)</td>
<td>22 (40.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific personality disorders</td>
<td>18 (31.0%)</td>
<td>17 (30.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somato-form disorders</td>
<td>14 (24.1%)</td>
<td>12 (21.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety disorders</td>
<td>8 (13.4%)</td>
<td>7 (12.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>3 (5.2%)</td>
<td>1 (1.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsessive-compulsive disorders</td>
<td>2 (3.4%)</td>
<td>2 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: MFT = the patient group that was treated during the phase in which the therapists practiced Zen meditation; CG = control group (patients who were treated during the phase before Zen meditation began).
The results possibly indicate that the promotion of mindfulness in psychotherapists in training can positively affect the course of therapy and the treatment results in their patients. Furthermore, the fact that effects can also be demonstrated on the patients’ symptomatic level, on the relatively sensitive VEV and even on the SCL-90-R, speaks for a possible special efficacy of this intervention: at any rate, the patients were treated not only with individual psychotherapy, but also with numerous other therapeutic tasks, such as art and music group therapy, indicative group therapy, sports therapy, kinesitherapy, and physical therapy, etc.

Psychotherapeutic research has long neglected the “psychotherapist as an instrument” in favour of psychotherapeutic techniques (cf. [3]). Our study with psychotherapists in training, who are completing their training program to be licensed psychotherapists in training, was designed to test the extent to which the promotion of mindfulness could achieve positive effects in the treatment of patients. Hence, the inclusion of such methods in the training of psychotherapists could have a generally positive effect on the patients’ treatment. Thus, such methods could conceivably become a recommended component of the psychotherapist’s education.

This study had however several methodological limitations. First, the control was merely carried out through the “non-Zen phase”. In this case, because the non-Zen phase occurred before the Zen phase, the so-called learning effect experienced by the PiTs in the intervening time period could have contributed to a greater difference between the two treatment groups. Second, the PiTs underwent Zen training of only a relatively short duration. Whether the potency of the effect increases or decreases with time needs to be researched. In addition, the Zen training here was not tested against a placebo intervention.

Additional randomized trials, in which larger numbers of psychotherapists in training participate, as well as already experienced therapists, are necessary to test the extent to which our results can be generalized.
Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to Soto Zen Master Fumon S. Nakagawa Roshi and his colleagues from the Zen Center of Eisenbruch, Germany, for leading the Zen meditation group in the Inntalklinik during this study. We also express our appreciation to Ann Marie Ackermann, JD, for proof reading and translating this article.

References