

Somatization of anxiety among primary care patients.

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Abstract

Somatization of anxiety is a common phenomenon among primary care patients, leading to physical symptoms that mimic illness. This can result in unnecessary medical investigations, treatments, and hospital admissions, causing distress to patients. Anxiety activates the sympathetic nervous system, leading to increased physiological arousal, and can also be a coping mechanism. The prevalence of somatization of anxiety among primary care patients is high, estimated at up to 50% of visits. Treatment options include cognitive-behavioral therapy and pharmacological approaches such as antidepressants and anxiolytics. Primary care physicians should consider patients' psychological and social context and take a thorough history to identify somatization of anxiety.

Keywords: Somatization, Anxiety, Primary care, Psychological distress, Antidepressants, Anxiolytics.

Introduction

Somatization of anxiety is a common phenomenon among primary care patients. It refers to the physical symptoms experienced by individuals as a result of their anxiety, which can sometimes be so severe that it mimics physical illness. This can lead to unnecessary medical investigations, treatments, and hospital admissions, which can be expensive and distressing for patients. In this article, we will explore the causes of somatization of anxiety, its prevalence, and possible treatment options. Somatization is defined as the manifestation of psychological distress in physical symptoms. Patients with somatization disorder experience multiple and recurrent somatic symptoms that are not fully explained by medical investigations. Anxiety is a common cause of somatization, and it can lead to a wide range of physical symptoms, including chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, abdominal pain, and headaches [1].

The prevalence of somatization of anxiety among primary care patients is high, and it is estimated that up to 50% of all primary care visits are related to somatic symptoms. However, many patients do not recognize the link between their physical symptoms and anxiety, and they may attribute their symptoms to a physical illness. This can lead to multiple medical investigations, which can be costly and time-consuming. There are several reasons why anxiety can cause somatization. One possible explanation is that anxiety activates the sympathetic nervous system, leading to increased physiological arousal. This can cause physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, and heart palpitations. In addition, anxiety can cause hyperventilation, which can lead to dizziness, tingling sensations, and numbness in the hands and feet. These physical symptoms can be frightening, and they can lead to further anxiety and somatization [2].

Another possible explanation is that somatization is a form of coping mechanism. Patients may find it easier to express their psychological distress in physical symptoms rather than in words. In addition, patients may receive more attention and care from healthcare professionals when they present with physical symptoms. This can reinforce the somatization behavior and lead to further physical symptoms. The diagnosis of somatization disorder can be challenging, as it requires the exclusion of medical conditions that could explain the patient's symptoms. However, primary care physicians are well placed to identify patients with somatization of anxiety, as they often present with multiple somatic symptoms that are not fully explained by medical investigations. It is important to take a thorough history and to consider the patient's psychological and social context when making a diagnosis [3].

The treatment of somatization of anxiety involves both psychological and pharmacological approaches. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been shown to be effective in reducing somatic symptoms and anxiety in patients with somatization disorder. CBT focuses on identifying and challenging negative thoughts and beliefs that contribute to somatization. It also teaches patients coping strategies to manage their anxiety and physical symptoms [4].

Pharmacological treatment options include antidepressants and anxiolytics. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) have been shown to be effective in reducing somatic symptoms and anxiety in patients with somatization disorder. However, it is important to consider the potential side effects of these medications and to monitor patients closely [5].

Conclusion

Somatization of anxiety is a common phenomenon among primary care patients. It can lead to unnecessary medical

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investigations, treatments, and hospital admissions, which can be expensive and distressing for patients. Primary care physicians are well placed to identify patients with somatization of anxiety, and it is important to take a thorough history and to consider the patient's psychological and social context when making a diagnosis. The treatment of somatization of anxiety involves both psychological and pharmacological approaches, and a multidisciplinary team approach may be necessary to achieve optimal outcomes.

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