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Reflecting on Emotions Helps Patients in Therapy



What is this research about?

Emotions reflect the view that people have of themselves and their environment. In the early stages of therapy, patients often report feeling confused by their emotions. They sometimes have little or no awareness of how they have responded to others and the unspoken or unclear feelings beneath their responses. Some have argued that in order to get rid of emotions a patient needs to express them as much as possible. However, this form of 'cathartic' therapy, in which emotions are aroused, may not be sufficient in and of itself. Emotionally focused and experiential therapies try to help clients make sense of the unclear, subjective meaning of their emotions. They help people to develop new, coherent narratives about their emotions. But do these approaches – arousal and reflection – work better when they are combined? Does emotional arousal, when paired with reflection, lead to better therapeutic outcomes?

What you need to know:

Accepting and reflecting on emotions has a positive effect on people who are in therapy.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University set out to determine if having patients reflect on recently aroused emotions can lead to better results in therapy. They explored the emotional changes experienced by patients during therapy sessions that had good outcomes, such as reduced depression. They reviewed tapes and transcripts of sessions, and isolated and measured any episodes of emotion in the patients.

What did the researchers find?

In their first study, the researchers looked at 32 depressed patients who received only brief treatments of psychotherapy. They found that the arousal of emotion is more therapeutic if its purpose is to facilitate deeper emotions. In

their second study, they examined the use of emotional arousal but also the use of processing strategies as well as the patient-therapist working alliance. Their results varied. Emotional arousal in the middle of a patient's run of sessions improved self-esteem. Later sessions, however, reduced depression in patients. The two studies show that the processing of aroused emotion, especially later in therapy, leads to good outcomes. Therapists can facilitate this by helping patients to reflect on their emotions, to make better sense of them, and to integrate accessible feelings to solve problems. In short, making patients reflect on aroused emotion leads to important changes in the therapy process.

Citation

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Keywords

Catharsis, Depression, Emotion, Emotional arousal, Emotionally focused and experiential therapy, Reflection

How can you use this research?

Therapists and other mental health workers can use these results to help clients deal more effectively with emotion in psychotherapy. This new way of processing emotion is more effective than many other current therapeutic methods. It can lead to better outcomes for people undergoing therapy. However, more research is necessary to increase our understanding of emotional change processes in therapy.

About the Researchers

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