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Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. P, Řada psychologická. 2008,
vol. 56, iss. P12, pp. [79]-84

ISBN 978-80-210-4740-2

ISSN 1211-3522

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/114387>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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STRESS AND SUPPORT OF MENTAL HEALTH

Abstract: The subject matter of the proposed methodological study is a research project and its explanation. The research has three basic aims:

- A) An analysis and a comparison of psychological, psychosomatic and neuropsychological factors affecting the health of people employed in highly stressful occupations. This will be followed by a determination of the time necessary for the disappearance of the effects of stress with view to the above-mentioned intervening variables.
- B) A comparison of psychological, psychosomatic and neuropsychological profiles of professionals in sudden situations of crises and after the passage of such critical situations, compared with the profiles of common people in comparable situations. This will be followed by the drafting of intervention and recondition therapeutic programmes for both groups of people.
- A) To constitute, on the basis of facts obtained by means of the above-mentioned research steps, intervention programmes of psychotherapy and recondition programmes of sanotherapy aimed at various clearly delimited groups of people.

Key words: mental health; stress; people working under conditions of increased stress; recondition, relaxation and therapeutic programmes, research co-operation of the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Arts in Brno and the Centre for Complex Psychological Research of Stress at IMS in Brno

The support of and care about mental health constitutes one of the priorities of not only WHO but also the EU, namely the European Commission, whose programme provides for this fact. In January 2005, a conference of ministers of health was held in Helsinki, which gave rise to the Declaration on Mental Health and an Action Plan-printed matter of the European Comm., 2005. The research in the fields of prevention and prophylaxis of mental illnesses, clinical approaches, awareness-raising activities and research has had a tradition of more than 50 years. This was done under various umbrella terms: mental hygiene, psychosomatics, behavioural medicine, as well as – in the past decade – psychology of health, which tries to integrate parts of the programmes and methods of psychosomatics and behavioural medicine. However, it appears that this has resulted in a lack of clarity and systematic character – as regards the opinions of both what should be included in the field of psychology of health and what target objects of care should be prioritized, what programmes should be offered to them and

what forms of offer should be chosen. Similarly problematic remains the issue in which direction research in this field should be directed because everything that could be researched with the help of existing psychodiagnostic methods and other tools has already been researched.

Who are the target objects of preventive programmes, psycho-prophylactic programmes, programmes in support of mental health with the aim of inspiring people to change their lifestyle and improve the quality of their lives?

The targets include broken homes and children growing up in such dysfunctional environments (i.e. children of drug addicts, children of alcoholics, children of parents with disharmonious personality structures, physically and sexually abused children, children growing up without love and threatened with the risk of suicides, children of divorcing parents, etc.).

The target objects also include old people (often suffering from loneliness, mental and physical pain as a result of illness, and frequently being without consolation), the unemployed, people released from prisons, drug addicts, women with children and without partners, deserted mothers with increased demands on the care of children, people with high risks of stress (e.g. people in supporting professions or employed in highly stressful occupations), and young people with psychiatric diagnoses.

The programmes offered for the purpose of supporting health have various forms and contents. Some are socially psychological, rehabilitation, legal advisory, existential programmes, while others include specific programmes for the support of healthy lifestyle of the young. They are aimed at stimulating the development of their creative abilities and social and communicative skills on the one hand, and, on the other, at inspiring the development of the spiritual aspect of human existence. In this way, the programmes lead individuals to appreciate – from their own internal sources – the respect of life, the world around them, as well as values extending beyond themselves, eventually cultivating their self-respect.

All these are nice-sounding topics but their specific contents and implementation are often somewhat problematic. If the above-mentioned topics should have any value, they should not end in mere declarations but, instead, result in the formulation of specific steps leading to the attainment of intended goals. These steps should represent clear shifts from what has previously been made in the given context. This is because people never do anything to feel worse. They are educated and know exactly what they should do for themselves. But this is precisely what does not work: within a given population, there is a rising percentage of people suffering from various forms of emotional disturbances and mental and spiritual distress. These are manifested through neuropsychological, mental and somatic symptoms, immunity system breakdowns, all arising from the decreasing degree of frustration tolerance and increasing levels of stress. There are people who either are gradually progressing towards a psychiatric diagnosis or already have their psychiatric diagnoses specified. There are even more people who are

experiencing suffering but are, for various reasons, unable to seek help. Why is it, then, that people do not feel better and why does a conference have to be organized in order to point out how people should improve their own lives?

Let us try to provide answers to some of these questions. The Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno and the Centre for Complex Research of Stress at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies in Brno have prepared an extensive research aimed at people in supporting professions and people employed in highly stressful occupations.

The following fundamental aims of the research projects have been set:

- A) An analysis and a comparison of psychological, psychosomatic and neuropsychological factors affecting the dynamism and profile of cognitive performance, the dynamism and profile of emotionality, parameters of emotional stability vs. emotional lability and the degree of stress resistance among people employed in highly stressful occupations. This will include an analysis of the time necessary for the disappearance of effects of stress with view to the above-mentioned intervening variables.
- B) A comparison of psychological, psychosomatic and neuropsychological profiles of professionals in sudden situations of crises and after the passage of such critical situations, compared with the profiles of common people in comparable situations. This will be followed by the drafting of intervention and recondition therapeutic programmes for both groups of people.
- C) To constitute, on the basis of facts obtained by means of the above-mentioned research steps, intervention programmes of psychotherapy and recondition programmes of sanotherapy aimed at various clearly delimited groups of people. It is expected that the degree of efficiency of newly constituted intervention and recondition programmes will show a statistically significant correlation on the bio-chemical level with positive changes represented by the modification of blood pressure and pulse frequency, decrease of the level of stress hormones in the blood streams, decrease of hyperirritation of sympathetic towards the physiological state etc. It is expected that the degree of efficiency of the therapeutic programmes proposed in this research shows a statistically significant correlation with the degree of positive shift in self-knowledge, manifested in the objectively ascertainable positive shift in self-conception (support of internal integrity, externally manifested by a higher mental stability). We further expect to find statistically significant correlation with a positive shift in the hierarchical value system and the shift of attitudes towards one's own health, which is externally manifested as a positive change of life-style. We also expect to find correlations with the positive changes in ego function (which have their specific expression in the positive shift on a scale between satisfaction with one's life and dissatisfaction with one's life, as well as in the positive shift of one's quality of life).

Project description

Previous research projects (see 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th etc., Annual Conference of the European Health Psychology Society, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *Psychology and Health*, etc.), aimed at the issue of stress, usually failed to pay suitable attention to the complex psychological, psychosomatic and neuropsychological profiles of human behaviour in sudden situations of crises in comparison to the profiles of such people after the passage of such stressful situations. The advantage of the present research project is its focus on a complex approach to humans in sudden situations of crises and after their passage. The aim of such an approach to people is to provide them, on the basis of facts substantiated by research, with such specific intervention and recondition programmes that would enhance their mental hardiness (self efficacy), physical resistance to stress, and thus enable them to deal with the problematic situations in an efficient manner.

For these reasons, the proposed research project aims to analyse factors (components of cognition and their quality, etc.) determining the dynamism of one's cognitive performance, and to specify the profile of cognitive performance. At the same time, the research project is oriented at analysing quality and variability of the "functionality" of cognitive and executive functions in stressful situations.

A significant place in the proposed research project is held by an analysis of factors (components of emotionality and their quality and intensity of manifestations) determining the dynamism of emotional processes, and to specify the profile of emotional processes of people in sudden situations of crises and following such stress. It is also considered essential to observe the frequency and intensity of current anxiety, fear, passionate and angry reactions, alterations between grandiosity, depression and resignation, etc.

The complexity of the research of stress likewise requires an orientation to neuropsychological symptoms which are closely related to the nature of the prevailing emotional perception of people under stress. This concerns headaches, dizziness, mildly changed states of consciousness, insomnia, various clinical forms of tremor, etc. which further enhance the intensity of negative emotions and increase their frequency. Negative emotions and neuropsychological difficulties act as initiators of such psychosomatic problems as feelings of breathlessness, pain in the abdomen, strain and pressure around the heart, etc. The cognitive performance of people and their adaptive behaviour are affected not only by the level of their emotional stability or liability and frequency and intensity of their negative emotions but also the frequency and intensity of neuropsychological symptoms and psychosomatic symptoms in the course of their cognitive performance.

The research project pays special attention to factors effective in difficult life situations of humans such as their personality characteristics and character traits (as well as the proportion between protective and risk characteristics of personality). Similarly important, in the context of the proposed research, is the analysis of the level of personality regulation (ego functions and their maturity, the quality of the volitional process necessary for overcoming obstacles or sustaining intentional

attention on a certain object and thus distancing from the oscillations of one's attention), as the highest level in the hierarchically organized regulatory system of particular people. The ascertaining of the level of personality regulation of individual humans makes it possible to predict their indefatigability and resistance to stressors in sudden situations of crises, and enables the identification of an adequate form of intervention or recondition therapeutic programmes for specific individuals.

It is proposed, in order to obtain a good-quality prediction of human behaviour and perception under stress, that this research should also observe the changes (and their causes) in the hierarchical value system and the motivational structure of humans. These are aimed at mobilising people's mental and energy reserves and are crucial in order to cope successfully with the acute consequences of stress as early as possible – while the stressful situation still lasts. In this connection, it is also desirable to observe some changes in people's attitudes towards themselves and the stressful situation from the point of view of time. The change of some parameters of motivational structure, the value system and the attitude towards one's own real existence may result in a change of one's life style, which can be either positive or negative. As a result of traumatic events, an individual may, for instance, be predisposed towards some form of addiction or, by contrast, may develop a higher resistance towards stressors in stressful situations. As mentioned above, the positive changes in particular humans may be triggered by corresponding specific forms and contents of therapeutic programmes of intervention and recondition.

The prerequisites for effective behaviour of humans under stress include a good condition of their cognitive and executive functions, a certain degree of emotional stability and a certain level of personal maturity. This does not, of course, mean that the process of management of sudden situations of crises requires only humans who react optimally and act unequivocally towards solving the stressful situations in a positive way. Humans acting effectively and adaptively will, with a high degree of probability, cope with sudden situations of crises without mental and physical collapse even if their momentary cognitive performance under stress becomes deficient for a short time and they are not able to find immediate solutions to such problematic situations. People like these will, however, retain the necessary optimism and hope that the situation will improve and that it is not exclusively up to them to deal with it (i.e. they have someone as their social support). What is significant in the above-mentioned context is also the false premises only in order to calm one's mind. A person's good self-conception and an increased self-knowledge enables persons to abandon maladaptive patterns of behaving and perceiving, and, subsequently, to find and apply adaptive patterns of behaving. In other words, they enable the mobilisation of an adaptive coping strategy for the management of difficult situations of crises. On the behavioural level, the above-mentioned facts are manifested in a person's ability to distance themselves from the immediate situation in order to obtain an external perspective and look for new – even unusual – ways of solving stressful situations. People are then able to stand even failures and can learn from them.

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STRES A PODPORA DUŠEVNÍHO ZDRAVÍ

Obsahem předložené metodické studie je teoreticky podložený a zdůvodněný výzkumný projekt. Má tři cíle:

- A) Analýza a komparace psychologických, psychosomatických a neuropsychologických faktorů, ovlivňujících zdraví lidí, kteří pracují v podmínkách s nadměrnou zátěží. Analýza času potřebného k odeznění následků stresu s přihlédnutím k přesně definovaným intervenujícím proměnným.
- B) Komparace psychologického, psychosomatického a neuropsychologického profilu lidí z pomáhajících profesí v náhlých krizových situacích a po odeznění krizové situace, s profilem lidí z běžné populace v zátěžových situacích a konstituování intervenčních a rekondičních terapeutických programů pro obě skupiny lidí.
- C) Na základě faktů získaných výše uvedenými výzkumnými kroky konstituovat širší spektrum psychoterapeutických programů s cílem zjistit míru jejich efektivnosti (velikost změny) a současně ověřit, zda tato změna statisticky významně koreluje s pozitivními změnami na biochemické úrovni.

Klíčová slova: duševní zdraví, stres, lidé pracující v podmínkách s nadměrnou zátěží, rekondiční, relaxační a terapeutické programy, výzkumná spolupráce Psychologického ústavu FF MU a Centra pro komplexní psychologický výzkum stresu při IMS v Brně.