

Psychodynamic Psychotherapy for Functional Somatic Complaints

Short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy focusing on awareness and processing of emotionally laden material can be helpful for somatization.

Is psychodynamic psychotherapy still relevant? Researchers addressed this question in a meta-analysis of 17 randomized, controlled trials involving 2004 patients (mean age, 43) with disorders characterized by functional somatic complaints such as irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, and chronic pain disorders.

The studies compared short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy (STPP) with treatment as usual, waiting lists, or minimal treatment; some studies involved comparisons with other treatments. STPP included mainly manual-based therapies lasting an average of 14 sessions (range, 3–33) and involving individual or group face-to-face psychotherapy focusing on awareness and processing of emotionally laden material and conflict that often involves early adverse experiences.

STPP was clinically and statistically superior for reducing functional somatic complaints over the first 3 months, 3 to 6 months, and >6 months after treatment completion. Effect sizes were large in the short- and long-term, and moderate at 3 to 6 months. Effect sizes for depression and anxiety were also large in short- and long-term follow-ups.

COMMENT

Small sample sizes and study heterogeneity limited interpretation of the meta-analytic results, but the authors' review of five studies that involved head-to-head comparisons found STPP to be at least as effective as standard psychotherapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness. The tendency of many somatizing patients to express emotions through physical dysfunction rather than words need not deter us from implementing psychodynamically informed psychotherapy for functional somatic disorders. — **Steven Dubovsky, MD**

Dr. Dubovsky is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

*Abbass A et al. Short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy for functional somatic disorders: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. **Psychother Psychosom** 2020 May 19; [e-pub]. (<https://doi.org/10.1159/000507738>)*