

The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy for Treating Catatonic Depression in Older Adults

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DESCRIPTION

Catatonic depression is a severe and often debilitating form of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) that manifests as a combination of deep mood disturbance and physical symptoms such as immobility, mutism and unusual posturing. While it can occur at any age, the onset of catatonic depression in older adults presents unique challenges, both in terms of diagnosis and treatment. Psychotherapy, as a non-invasive treatment modality, has shown potential in addressing the psychological components of this complex condition. This study examines the effectiveness of psychotherapy for treating catatonic depression in older adults, considering the specific needs of this age group and how various therapeutic approaches can lead to significant improvement.

Catatonic depression

Catatonic depression is characterized by motoric immobility or excessive motor activity, negativism (resistance to movement or commands), mutism and sometimes peculiar posturing or grimacing. The condition is often seen as a subtype of major depressive disorder but with distinct psychomotor symptoms. It can result in profound impairments in functioning, including the inability to perform daily activities, communicate or even eat. In older adults, these symptoms are often complicated by other age-related health issues, such as cognitive decline, medical comorbidities and social isolation, making the treatment of catatonic depression particularly challenging.

The exact cause of catatonic depression is not fully understood, but it is believed to arise from abnormalities in brain chemistry, particularly involving the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine and Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA). In older adults, the condition may be precipitated or exacerbated by factors such as chronic medical illness, social isolation, a history of trauma, or certain medications. The presence of other psychiatric conditions, such as dementia or Parkinson's disease, can further complicate diagnosis and treatment.

The role of psychotherapy in treating catatonic depression

While pharmacotherapy (typically with antidepressants or antipsychotics) has been the primary treatment for catatonic depression, psychotherapy also plays an important role, particularly in older adults. Psychotherapy offers a non-invasive alternative to medications, which may be less effective or more challenging to use in this population due to potential drug interactions, side effects and cognitive decline.

Psychotherapy in treating older adults with catatonic depression focuses on addressing both the psychological and social factors contributing to the depression and the catatonic features. Effective therapeutic strategies are tailored to the needs and cognitive capacities of the individual, incorporating a range of approaches designed to engage patients and promote emotional and psychological healing.

Types of psychotherapy effective for catatonic depression in older adults

Several therapeutic approaches have shown potential in treating catatonic depression in older adults. These approaches focus on the psychological underpinnings of depression, as well as the management of catatonic symptoms and their impact on daily life.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most widely used and effective psychotherapies for treating depression. In older adults, CBT aims to address negative thought patterns, maladaptive beliefs and the behavioral withdrawal that often accompanies depression. For individuals with catatonic depression, CBT can help by encouraging engagement with the outside world and challenging the automatic thoughts that fuel the individual's emotional withdrawal and motoric immobility.

Behavioral Activation Therapy (BAT): Behavioral Activation Therapy (BAT) is a treatment approach that targets the inactivity

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and withdrawal often seen in depression. It works by helping patients identify pleasurable or meaningful activities they have stopped engaging in due to depression and gradually reintroduce them into their daily routines. In older adults with catatonic depression, BAT can be particularly effective in reducing immobility and encouraging patients to move, even if initially only in small ways.

Psychodynamic therapy: Psychodynamic therapy focuses on uncovering unconscious thoughts and unresolved conflicts, which can contribute to emotional distress and depression. In older adults with catatonic depression, psychodynamic therapy may be particularly helpful when depression stems from unresolved grief, trauma, or other deeply embedded psychological issues that have not been addressed.

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT): Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is an evidence-based treatment that focuses on improving interpersonal relationships and social functioning, which are often impaired in individuals with depression. Older adults with catatonic depression may experience significant social isolation, which worsens feelings of depression and helplessness. IPT can help these individuals understand how their relationships, social roles and interpersonal interactions contribute to their mental health.

Reminiscence therapy: For some older adults, particularly those who are less able to engage in traditional psychotherapy, reminiscence therapy can be a helpful intervention. This approach involves encouraging individuals to recall and discuss past experiences, particularly those that were meaningful or emotionally significant. Reminiscence therapy can help improve mood, combat isolation and foster a sense of purpose.

CONCLUSION

Psychotherapy can be an effective treatment option for older adults suffering from catatonic depression, particularly when tailored to the individual's cognitive abilities, life history and unique symptoms. Approaches like CBT, behavioral activation, psychodynamic therapy, interpersonal therapy and reminiscence therapy have all shown potential in helping patients manage the psychological and social dimensions of the condition. While challenges remain, psychotherapy offers a valuable, non-invasive alternative or complement to pharmacological treatments, contributing to improved outcomes and quality of life for older adults with this severe form of depression. With appropriate adaptations, psychotherapy can offer a lifeline for elderly individuals battling catatonic depression, providing the tools they need to reclaim their agency, engagement and emotional well-being.