

Original Article

The effectiveness of tactical defenses clarification in intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy on trait and state anxiety

Amir Nabizadeh^{1*}, Razieh Haji Moradi²

1. M.A. in Psychology, Bu-Ali Sina University, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Hamadan, Iran.
2. Ph.D. Student of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

Abstract

The present research was conducted aiming at determining the effectiveness of tactical defenses clarification in intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy on trait and state anxiety. This research is of quasi-experimental (pre-test and post-test design with a control group) type. The population included the patients referring to the clinic in Saeedieh Tower in Hamedan in 2018. The participants were selected by voluntary sampling with non-random selection and random assignment. For the selection, 13 applicants were selected and placed in the experimental group and 13 other applicants were selected and placed in the control group as well. The data were collected by means of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Interventions for the experimental group were performed in 10 sessions for 45 minutes weekly and no intervention was conducted for the control group. The findings showed that the difference between the mean scores of trait anxiety and state anxiety between the control and the experiment group was significant and it can be mentioned that the decrease in state and trait anxiety is due to independent variable effectiveness. Significance was found in trait anxiety ($p = 0.001$, $f = 14.27$) and in state anxiety ($p = 0.001$, $f = 15.30$). The results indicate that the tactical defenses clarification based on intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy has led to a reduction in state and trait anxiety.

Keywords

Tactical defense
Intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy
State anxiety
Trait anxiety

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Introduction

Anxiety is a common phenomenon in the present era and at the same time has a history as far as human history (Conte, 2007, 2013). According to Sadock (2015) and Lader (2015), a low level of anxiety is necessary and vital for daily life, but a high level of anxiety affects highly on the body, mind, social relations, profession, and education. Anyone with anxiety shows it with symptoms such as headache, sweating, palpitations, chest tightness and stomachache (Zadok, 2008). Anxiety feeling refers to the self-conscious awareness of these bodily senses. When

these symptoms are excited by an external threat, we call them fear, and if they are excited by the feelings, then we call them anxiety (Frederickson, 2015).

Spielberger proposed the trait and state theory of anxiety in 1966. He distinguished between the trait anxiety and the state anxiety. In his conceptualization, the anxiety is a reactive state involving adverse feelings of tension, which is perceived consciously (an unstable emotional state) and is associated with the arousal of the autonomic nervous system. On the other hand, the trait anxiety is a typical long-standing personality trait and is related to relatively constant individual differences in preparation to become anxious (Spielberger, Gorsuch,

Lushene, 1970; Kraskian, 2015). Anxiety is often the result of conflict with important people in life (Blatt, 2008) and is one of the most unpleasant psychological experiences and the study of anxiety and factors related to it has become a cliché for researchers in the field of psychology. However, there are many unknown issues about it and hence, the study of anxiety based on a different approach and a new perspective is essential (Davanloo, 1995, 2009). One of these approaches is intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy in which several studies have been conducted to reduce the anxiety by ISTDP (Knijnik, Blanco, Salum, Moraes, Mombach, et al., 2008).

Intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy method, which was developed by Habib Davanloo, is a psychodynamic therapy with a precise focus on excitement and managing a set of defenses. A method, which focuses on identifying and concentrating on emotional stimuli, current symptoms, and behavioral problems (Abbass, Jafar & Ogrodniczuk, 2008; Davanloo, 1996; Abbas, Town, Johansson et al., 2019). This sort of treatment method is a connection between the experience of feeling and reflecting on it. In fact, the therapist reveals the (verbal and non-verbal) physical symptoms of the feelings by identifying and clarifying the client's defenses and directing him/her to pay attention to his/her physical symptoms when the feelings appear (Johansson, Town, Abbas, 2014; Wolf & Fredrickson, 2013). In this treatment method, the therapist evaluates the patient's body senses and defenses. If he/she is using the defense, the therapist helps him/her see the defense and put it aside (Frederickson, Kashanki and Aslani, 2018; Shedler, 2010).

The main defenses have mostly intra-psychological nature, while the tactical defenses have mostly interpersonal nature and are used to avoid a close emotional connection. Harms to attempts made in the past to establish an intimate relationship provide the basis (ground) with the emergence of tactical defenses. Tactical defenses and their interventional methods are characterized by intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy. Indeed, the tactical defenses of all verbal and non-verbal maneuvers of the client is to divert or prevent a targeted intimate relationship (Ghorbani, 2003). A number of tactical verbal defenses include ambiguous speech, the use of contradictory expressions, conversations in vain, or talking about diverse issues. In addition, some non-verbal tactical defenses include avoiding eye contact, smiling, and crying. Their body gestures are either very dry, and inflexible, or very soft, indicating the patient's defense against a close emotional connection (Delaslova, 1996; Frederickson & Messina & Gerkichi, 2018). Clarification of tactical defenses based

on ISTDP, i.e. withdrawal of defenses or reduction of the anxiety, which leads to the prevention of emotional intimacy and closeness (Grecucci & Job and Fredrickson, 2017; Contardi and Empertori, Penzo, Del Gatto, Farina, 2016). If this treatment method is implemented correctly, not only the psychological aspect, but also the other aspects such as social and family ones will become important and take a positive effect. In total, tactical defenses are an escape from the anxiety, which are aroused due to being afraid of failing again in emotional intimacy (due to fail in primary emotional intimacy with parents).

With regard to the lack of the research, which investigates the dynamic changes with a focus on tactical defenses, the aim of the present research is actually to investigate the effectiveness of tactical defenses clarification in intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy on trait and state anxiety.

Method

Participants

This research is applied in terms of purpose and is a quasi-experimental one with pre-test, post-test design with a control group. The population of the present research was the patients referring to the clinic of Saeedieh Tower in Hamadan in 2018. The subjects were selected by voluntary sampling with non-random selection and random assignment. In order to select the participants, out of 20 individuals, who applied for psychotherapy, 13 applicants (12 girls, 1 boy), who were suitable for intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy (the first trial session determines the selection), were selected and placed in the experimental group. Out of 20 other applicants, 13 applicants (12 girls, 1 boy) (who showed the anxiety in the pre-test) were selected and placed in the control group. The conditions to enter into the research were the consent of the participants to attend the research and to participate in all the meetings. Withdrawal conditions have been as follows: Taking medication or any type of psychotherapy concurrently, having a history of psychosis, addiction, and severe disorder in tremor control. In this research, the intervention made for the experimental group was the tactical defenses clarification based on intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy. This protocol was implemented in 10 weekly sessions for 45 minutes each session. Due to the limited time of the researchers and therapists, it was not possible for 13 individuals to receive one 45-minute weekly psychotherapy session concurrently and regularly. Because of this, four to six people received ten-session interventions. Then, other therapists were added. A total of 97 hours of psychotherapy, 130 45-minute sessions,

and imaging from the sessions of several consensual clients were performed for imaging. The research therapist was the student, who conducted the project.

The steps and objectives of the sessions in brief

Step 1, questioning (description of step and aim): A precise interview focusing on the client's recent problem, providing a clear explanation regarding the problem, a precise and inquisitive question by the therapist aim at accurately identifying the patient's problem and facilitating the recall and emotional engagement.

Step 2, pressure (description of step and aim): Focusing on feelings and pressure to experience the feelings aim at the emergence of the defenses.

Step 3, Challenge (goal and step description): Emergence of the defenses, identifying the defenses, clarifying the defenses with the goal of gaining insight into your defenses and making it be identified

A few examples of tactical defenses and intervention method

Tactical defense	Intervention to clarify the defense
Talking to avoid touching the feelings	You talk non-stop. Do you realize this? We cannot understand this feeling with repeated talking.
The empty words	"I was shocked" do not tell us how you felt this anger in your ego. The "feeling of emptiness" does not determine how you feel.
Deviation	You deviate from (avoid) my question and want to talk about your childhood. My question is how did you feel this annoyance inside yourself, but you are talking about something else.
Indirect speech	Again, you say "I think", "maybe", "possible" I felt uncomfortable. You are talking hypothetically about everything.
Non-verbal cues	Now, you turn your head in that direction, do you realize that? Do you see that you avoid looking into my eyes and then laugh? Do you understand that your hands are clenched?

The data, which were obtained from the State and Trait Anxiety Inventory, were collected and entered into a computer and analyzed using SPSS software version 22. The obtained data are described using descriptive statistics indicators such as the mean and standard deviation. The significance of the difference in the mean scores of the post-test of state and trait anxiety of the two groups of control and experiment was investigated in inferential statistics section using multivariate analysis of covariance.

Results

A table of descriptive indicators of the sample is presented based on the state and trait anxiety scores of the control and experimental groups separately in this section.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of state and trait anxiety in pre-test and post-test groups

Variable	Pre-test	Frequency	Mean	Standard deviation	Post-test	Frequency	Mean	Standard deviation
Standard deviation	Experimental	13	51.00	14.62	Experimental	13	38.38	14
	Control	13	51.07	11.57	Control	13	51.92	10.19
Trait anxiety	Experimental	13	45.84	13.67	Experimental	13	26.38	8.61
	Control	13	45.53	7.79	Control	13	45.84	7.27

Table 1 shows the significance of the difference between the mean scores of state and trait anxiety in the experimental and control groups. Research-related variables are related to each other in different ways in the concept; for this reason, multivariate analysis of covariance, which is the extension and expansion of one-variable analysis of covariance, has been used.

Table 2. Results of analysis of covariance on post-test scores of the dependent variable with control of pre-test scores

Variable	Factor	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	of Mean squares	f	Significance level	ETA square
State anxiety	Group	579.54	1	579.54	15.30	0.001	0.46
	Error	681.45	18	37.85			
Trait anxiety	Group	559.70	1	559.70	14.27	0.001	0.44
	Error	705.78	18	39.21			

Table 2 shows the results of trait anxiety, the value of f obtained is 14.27 and the significance level is lower than 0.05 ($P = 0.001$, $F = 14.27$). Therefore, the difference in the mean scores of trait anxiety between the control and the experiment group is significant and it can be said that the reduction of trait anxiety is due to the effectiveness of the independent variable.

This effect is 44% with regard to ETA squares. In addition, Table 2 shows that the value of f obtained by the state anxiety is 15.30 and its significance level is less than 0.05 ($p = 0.001$, $f = 15.30$). Therefore, the difference between the mean scores of state anxiety between the control and experimental groups is significant and it can be mentioned that the reduced state anxiety is due to the effectiveness of the independent variable. This effect is 46% with regard to ETA squares.

Discussion

Findings of this research based on the fact that tactical defenses clarification in intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy reduces the state and trait anxiety was consistent with the results of the studies by Himberg et al. (2001), Bond and Perry (2005), Mahmoudi, Ghahsareh, Aghamohammadian, Dehghani, Hassanabadi. (2013), Afzali, Ashtiani, Azad Fallah. (2009), Amani, Ashtiani, Azad Fallah. (2020), Taghavi, Mirzaei, Azandariani, Rezaei, Shojaei. (2019), Hajloo and Molaei (2020), Turani, Sharifi, Daramadi, Farrokhi (2020).

In explanation of the finding related to state anxiety, it can be said that according to Spielberger (1966), the state anxiety is considered as an unstable emotional state (the person becomes anxious in the presence of the therapist due to the fear of close emotional communication). From

a developmental viewpoint, those emotional states that parents do not tolerate in children get filled with anxiety, and this anxiety cause the defensive layers to be built. Due to the failure in initial attachment to the parents, the person subconsciously resists to emotional intimacy for the fear of the hurts' repetition in the past and preventing it. Identifying, clarifying, and insight into defenses can lead to putting aside the defenses, anxiety tolerance, touching the feeling, and ultimately reduced state anxiety. In explanation of the finding related to the trait anxiety, according to Spielberger (1966), the trait anxiety is a preparation for a wide range of situations, which makes a person anxious. According to psychodynamic viewpoint, there is an innate capacity for the formation of intimacy and emotional attachment to parents or their surrogates and if the child fails in it, he or she will experience pain and a reactive anger. This pain and anger lead to the formation of feeling of guilt and sadness, and the person uses defenses in order to avoid these conflicting feelings. Whenever the feelings are aroused in interpersonal relationships, the person experiences anxiety (here, the anxiety is a caution for the feelings intolerance). Trait anxiety is activated in most situations, not just in the presence of a therapist. Identifying, clarifying, and insight into defenses can lead to the elimination or reduction of defenses, toleration of the anxiety, touching of the genuine feelings, and ultimately, reduction of the trait anxiety.

Conclusion

This research was conducted aiming at determining the effectiveness of tactical defenses clarification in intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy on state and trait anxiety. The findings show that tactical defenses clarification based on intensive, short-term dynamic psychotherapy has led to a reduction in state and trait anxiety. All the dear clients and individuals, who assisted us in this research, are appreciated.

With the exception of two boys, the rest of the psychotherapy volunteers were girls and this may create difficulty in findings generalizations. Parents are advised to be careful about how they respond emotionally to their children, as they have a significant impact on the formation of their children's emotional communication pattern, and they form a disruptive communication pattern for them in adulthood if they make the need to emotional attachment in their children fail. With regard to the rapid and widespread effectiveness of intensive and short-term dynamic psychotherapy, it is suggested that other psychotherapists use this type of treatment (along with full implementation of the protocol) in the treatment of anxiety disorders.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there were no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article

ORCID

Amir Nabizadeh <http://ORCID.Org/0000,0001,9978,9475>

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