

On Perceptual Education and its Impacts on Anxiety and Self-Esteem from the Somatic-Psychoeducation (SPE) Perspective

Valérie Bouchet* and Anne Lieutaud

Associate Professors, Researchers at the Center for Applied Studies and Research in Perceptual Psychoeducation (CERAP), Fernando Pessoa University, Porto, Portugal

***Corresponding Author:** Valérie Bouchet, Associate Professors, Researchers at the Center for Applied Studies and Research in Perceptual Psychoeducation (CERAP), Fernando Pessoa University, Porto, Portugal.

Received: June 24, 2020; **Published:** July 09, 2020

Abstract

The reflection we wish to engage here concerns the role of the body in the relationship that exists between anxiety and self-esteem, to be able to envisage new ways of offering support to anxiety sufferers.

Keywords: *Somatic Psychoeducation; Anxiety and Self-Esteem; Relationship to the Body; Self-Presence*

Introduction

The reflection we engage here concerns the interrelation between anxiety and self-esteem. We know that a good level of self-esteem has beneficial effects on reducing anxiety and depression [1-4]. And conversely that, when an individual is threatened, the level of anxiety experienced depends on the level of self-esteem and not on what is perceived as a threat [5]. There is a debate on the possibility of a hierarchy of influences between these two parameters and in particular on whether or not the self-esteem trait is primary, acting either as a buffer or as an integer of anxiety [6-8]. We wish to introduce in the discussion the question of the relationship the person has to themselves - to their body, to their thought. Indeed, the work we present for discussion shows that dealing with anxiety and self-esteem involves the totality of the individual, both body and mind, and that it depends on the way sufferers perceive themselves, on the relationship they establish with themselves and on the transformation of their representations. Intervention programs combining mind and body dynamics have shown to be effective in improving self-esteem and reducing anxiety [9-11]. Somatic-psychoeducation (SPE) fits with this perspective through a practice that focuses particularly on educating body perception, which it considers to be primary in the transformation of representations. It is of particular interest as it mobilizes two modes of action at the same time: the enrichment of the person's perceptual ability to connect with bodily sensing and the stimulation of a reflection based on bodily lived experience [12].

Academic research and field surveys show interesting results

The results of a research study and two field surveys bring interesting elements to a reflection on the role of the body and especially that of the relationship to the body in the management of anxiety and self-esteem [13-15]. Bouchet, in her doctoral research, explored with 17 participants the links between self-esteem dynamics and the relationship to the body. She combined a semi-quantitative approach using the Rosenberg scale of self-esteem (RSES) with bilateral interviews held at the end of 12 individual sessions of SPE [14]. This allowed her to document the notion of connection to the body (as a state of "closeness" or proximity) and to self in relation to self-esteem. On a larger scale, a field survey was conducted on 114 participants which assessed the effects of 10 individual SPE sessions on self-esteem

and anxiety using Rosenberg RSES and Spielberger STAI-Y scales [15]. A second survey evaluated the effects on anxiety (STAI-Y) of an introspective practice used in SPE and called Full-Presence Meditation [13]. These three studies show significant beneficial effects such as: a strong decrease in state anxiety (situational anxiety) immediately after one full-presence meditation [13] or one individual SPE session [15]; a decrease in trait anxiety (structural anxiety) over time (10 individual sessions over the course of a year) [15]; and an improvement in self-esteem after 10 to 12 individual sessions over 12 to 18 months [15,16].

From bodily perception to self-relationship

The positive action observed occurs simultaneously on anxiety and on self-esteem. This joint effect is reported in the literature and is most often analyzed from a psychological point of view [17]. Yet the body seems to play a decisive role as described by Lieutaud and Bois [13] who show that a regular personal practice of Full-Presence Meditation tends to lower the level of trait anxiety. They relate it to the development of the relationship to the body, resulting from the way in which this introspective practice mobilizes simultaneously the attention on bodily perceptions and the reflection on the immediate experience. Bouchet's doctoral research [14] specifically explores the contours of such relationship to the body/to self through the general/overall modality of action of SPE. She observes that, as the person perceives themselves as "alive inside", that is to say "animated by a slow and gentle movement inside" their body, they experience a genuinely new relationship with themselves, bathed in a state of gentleness, calm and positivity and that it is in the process of describing these phenomena that the person validates themselves as well as their lived experience. These self-perceptions, that the participants say are completely new to them, renew and improve the person's vision of themselves and in doing so contribute to the improvement of their self-esteem and the reduction of their vulnerability to stress. Self-perception seems to encompass at the same time body awareness and a sense of being concerned, touched, involved in one's body.

We hypothesize that the joint benefit on anxiety and self-esteem is partly due to the way in which SPE combines into one, an action aimed at enhancing bodily perceptions and another focused on the relationship of the person to these perceptions, thereby stimulating, in real time of the experience, the person's perceptual acuity and reflection. This combined action allows the person to discover, name and validate the existence, within themselves, of 1/ warm and reassuring sensations, which result in states of tranquility and serenity that calm anxiety, 2/ feelings of softness and trust that positively affect inner well-being, self-relationship and therefore self-esteem.

Namian and Kirouac [18] consider the interaction between self-esteem and anxiety from a causal perspective, self-esteem being a sort of condition or means to calmly cope with life's difficulties, i.e. to have a low level of anxiety. We suggest a reformulation of this hypothesis: the increase in self-esteem is directly related to the gain in inner perception and in self-presence. This means that the more a person is present to themselves, the less s/he is dependent on external attention, and the more s/he gains in self-esteem. The lived experiencing of the body, positively lived, named and validated as such, enhances the value of the self, leading to the development of new ways of being: more confident, assertive and engaged. The dissipation of fear and stress, as reported by the participants, reflects the gradual and simultaneous alteration of trait anxiety.

Conclusion

We have attempted to show that the relationship to self and to the body has a central role in the relationship between self-esteem and anxiety. Exploratory and field work on support offered by SPE does reveal beneficial effects on self-esteem and anxiety. Our analysis suggests that the joint and simultaneous effects observed are rooted in the bodily experiencing process supported by SPE which focuses on the development of a relationship to the body and fosters increased self-presence.

What seems to us particularly interesting with regard to the joint problem of anxiety and self-esteem is the possibility of re-educating reflection through the enrichment of bodily perception and the renewal of the relationship to the body and to oneself. Indeed, it is the relationship to self that is educable and acts on anxiety and self-esteem. Thought does transform, but as a second step, following a fundamen-

tal bodily experience that comes to touch the person's frame of reference. This process of transformation has been conceptualized [19]: bodily experience, insight and awareness, change in representations, decision to act, renewal of modes of thinking and of self-perception.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Helene Pennel for her kind and professional proof reading and editing of our translation.

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Volume 9 Issue 8 August 2020

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