The Growing Role of Psychotherapy in the Elderly

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The benefits of psychotherapy in the elderly population have been underappreciated. Both inter-personal psychotherapy (IPT) and in particular, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) have been utilized in the geriatric population and have shown significant success. However, due to a shortage of trained psychotherapists, many elderly are unable to benefit from psychotherapy. Psychotherapy in the geriatric population can be used alone for many conditions or combined with pharmacotherapy. Eligibility for psychotherapy is mostly dependent on the cognitive status of the patient and the nature of the disorder. In the recent years, psychotherapy has gained more popularity among the geriatric population.

Poor or loss of self-esteem is a common issue in the aging population. Another common theme in later life is coping with multiple losses [1]. With advanced age, the proximity of death becomes a reality and dealing with this may become an obstacle to successful aging [1].

Elderly who are home bound are more prone to develop depression than their ambulatory peers. Major depressive disorder (MDD) or clinically significant depressive symptoms are found to be two to three times higher among home-bound elders compared to their ambulatory peers [2]. Antidepressants alone are often not sufficient for this population. A variety of psychotherapeutic approaches have been found to be useful in conjunction with medication. These include, cognitive behavioral therapy, problem-solving therapy; interpersonal psychotherapy; and reminiscence therapy [2].

Modified IPT for the outpatient geriatric population can significantly reduce potential dangerous behaviors such as suicidal ideation and other depressive symptoms [3].

CBT is potentially helpful for the geriatric patient who has relatively intact cognitive status. CBT in older adults mainly focuses on understanding and healthier ways of dealing with losses and transitions in later life. CBT is also beneficial for older adults with late-life depression accompanied by negative thoughts and is found to be superior to controlled trials. CBT is also useful in anxiety disorders, especially for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder and for a variety of sleep disorders [4].

Tele psychiatry psychotherapy in underserved or rural areas can be a useful tool for serving on a large scale in treating numerous mental health problems in geriatric population specially who are home bound [5].

In conclusion, there is need for further exploration and utilization of the benefits of psychotherapy in the elderly population with relatively intact cognitive status. Therapist training/expertise and appropriate patient selection play a crucial role in the outcome and success of psychotherapy in the elderly population.

References

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