

RELAXATION AND CREATIVE MEDITATION CENTERED ON NATURE HELPS IN ACTIVATING COPING MECHANISMS

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Abstract

According to previous studies, when people watch a video with life in nature, they become more aware of their profound Self, with immediate consequences like being significantly more relaxed and aware of their long term goals, suggesting that nature contemplation allows the access to both basic needs, and the connection between them and external resources, generating positive emotions. Thus, it helps in detaching from the stress factors and automatic functioning, and the person has the energy for creative actions. The present study reports the findings of a short experiment concerning the self-regulation mechanisms activated by a more complex exercise focused on nature. First, the participants in the experimental group were involved in a relaxation technique, by focusing on the natural functioning of Self, and in the imaginary exploration of their favorite place in nature, afterwards drawing it. The participants in the control group received no treatment. The statistical analysis showed that, at the end of the relaxation and the creative techniques, the participants in the experimental group had a significantly lower tendency to catastrophize, and a stronger focalization on planning. The results confirmed the activation of internal resources in a realistic manner.

Keywords: catastrophizing, coping, creative techniques, planning, self-awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

Creative action has always been seen as an expression of the implicit Self, which is the one facing the challenges of everyday life. The ability to cope with these challenges is expressed in a sense of integrity of self in time and space. The sense of self people usually experience comes from free floating attention to both internal and external signals (although, the signals are experienced as usual changes in the internal experience when meeting a specific stimulus, signaling a resonance with the safe conditions from exterior), usually characterized as a mindful living. When confronted with frightening experiences, threatening the personal integrity, the internal functioning changes: the attention is focused more on the exterior, and the person tends to react, using previously tested actions, in order to defend the self (Schore, 2019). In an intense or prolonged threat, internal mechanisms attenuate the pain, the person being less aware of it, and thus tolerating a transgressive action, but also being able to maintain an idea of self to be defended, but less felt. What makes the difference between survival and personal annulment is the removal or the ceasing of the transgressive action, and the initiation of the caring and restorative actions (Schore, 2019). This type of experience is often followed by a defense mechanism called dissociation: the self protects himself by forgetting or keeping the experience away from the awareness field. It is considered that persons who experienced dissociation often enough are not able to benefit from mindfulness

techniques (Forner, 2018), but they tend to re-enact the traumatic (transgressive) experience, or express it in creations, as the non-verbal expression involves the right hemisphere, where implicit memories of past traumatic experience are stored (Pearson and Wilson, 2019). Creating a safe space for self-awareness and self-expression may be viewed as a possible way to reconnect with the valuable resources and, more important, to recreate not only the sense of integrity, but also that of coherence of the self, allowing self-awareness and further development (Hass-Cohen and Clyde Findlay, 2019, Pearson and Wilson, 2019).

Creative meditation has been known for its effects of alleviating psychological pain and suffering (Schaub, 2006), for the expansion of the awareness field, necessary for changing the perspective over oneself (Mitrofan, 2004), allowing the discovery and development of previously unconscious resources, thus converting past negative experiences into pretexts for personal development, vulnerabilities into resources (Răban-Motounu, 2014a, b, c). Schofield (2002) presented creative meditation as a way of “transforming therapeutic impasse and facilitating a powerful and uplifting experience for despairing and traumatized clients” (p.59). She noted that creative mediation helps in feeling a positive affective state, which, in turn, facilitates awareness and appreciation of Self, especially the unique qualities. Creative meditation helps the person to feel more glad and joyful, and less restless, furious, nervous or stressed, when compared to a combination of relaxation, body scan, and imagery. Compared to a non-intervention group, participants undergoing creative meditation felt more relaxed, and less restless, preoccupied, thoughtful, sad, tired or anxious (Răban-Motounu and Vitalia, 2013).

Guided by the theory of Kaplan and Kaplan (2011) on the effects of natural environment, during an experiment involving watching a video with life in nature, compared with a short psychotherapeutic technique focused on becoming aware of and trying to solve a personal problem by creative means and a short psychological analysis, the relaxation effects and the awareness of long term goals were stronger for the first condition. All the other effects concerning the immediate emotional experience, needs organization, plans for action, and availability of the resources, both personal and external, were the same (Răban-Motounu, 2014).

Hass-Cohen and Clyde Findlay (2019) discuss memory reconsolidation in psychotherapy as contextualizing distressing episodic memory so that it facilitates the development of a coherent sense of self and autobiography. The creative activities help in this line by several mechanisms. They introduce moments that serve self-regulation when the recall of traumatic events surface, increasing arousal, preventing re-traumatization, and also allowing the creation of a coherent, non-disturbing narrative. In terms of neurochemicals, both dopamine and serotonin may be associated with creativity (Zaidel, 2014), helping in resistance to traumatic stress and managing high arousal associated with traumatic memory. Especially dopamine seems to be related with the motivational effort. Creative work sharing and awareness helps in overcoming the shame associated with different aspects of Self resulting from rejection, humiliation, helplessness, maintaining the focus on the need and the means to satisfy it (Răban-Motounu, 2015).

Metin, Karadas, Izgu, Ozdemir, and Demirci (2019) found that patients with early breast cancer receiving paclitaxel report higher use of planning, active coping, reframing, and emotional support after a 14-weeks program of both progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness meditation, and less fatigue, compared to those in the control condition.

Freud in his theory came with a dynamic, energetic point of view of the human being, who acts upon the life or death instinct in the conditions of reality: When reality or the internalized social norms do not allow their manifestation, the person uses different strategies to divert their energy.

The well-being though comes from expressing the life instinct when conditions allow it (Freud, 2000).

In the present research we wanted to add information about the effects of combining relaxation and creative meditation with creative expression on the awareness and use of different cognitive-emotional regulation strategies. Some of them may be associated with positive outcomes like refocusing on planning, and other with negative outcomes like catastrophizing, rumination, blaming self or others. It is important to notice that creative expression may also be used as a defense mechanism (sublimation) which allows the manifestation of either life or death drives in socially acceptable conditions. The specific hypotheses were:

- People participating in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing have a higher tendency to refocus on planning than those who did not.
- The catastrophizing tendency is lower after having participated in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing than in persons who did not.
- The tendency to ruminate is lower after having participated in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study followed a post-test experimental design with an experimental and a control group, integrating psychometric and statistical methods.

Participants

The participants were divided in two groups: an experimental and a control one. The 13 persons in the experimental group were students in Clinical Psychology: Assessment and Intervention masteral program, with a mean age of 30.23 years (standard deviation 9.81), 11 females and 2 men. The control group consisted in 14 persons from the community with a mean age of 20.78 years (standard deviation 1.76), with the same distribution on gender. They participated as volunteers for the study.

Instruments

The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ, Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven, 2001) is a 36-item questionnaire assessing stable dispositional cognitive emotional regulation strategies people use when confronted with stressful or frightening situations. The items refer only to the thoughts a person has after such a situation. These strategies include: Self-blame, Acceptance, Rumination, Positive reappraisal, Refocusing on planning, Positive refocusing, Putting into perspective, Catastrophizing, and Blaming others. *Self-blame* refers to a causal attribution of the negative event to self. *Acceptance* means accepting the negative event as it was, and living it on cognitive and affective level. *Rumination* refers to the re-examination of the negative event with possible different consequences. *Positive reappraisal* is the strategy according to which the person tries to find the positive aspects of the negative event. *Refocusing on planning* means focusing the efforts on what the person can do to find a solution for the problematic situation or to make it easier to live with. *Positive refocusing* is the strategy of concentrating on other pleasant thoughts consecutive to the situation. *Putting into perspective* is defined as expanding the perspective by relating the event to others and considering its consequences from the new perspective. *Catastrophizing* refers to exaggerating the negative consequences of the event, and *Blaming others* refers to focusing in finding the person who caused it. The questionnaire is made of affirmations referring to personal thoughts after a negative event, and the respondent has to choose the answer from five variants, from *Almost never* to *Almost always*. The alpha Cronbach for each strategy was around .80.

Procedure

The participation in the experiment was volunteer and anonymous. The persons in the experimental group participated in a relaxation technique (progressively relaxing muscle groups on the left and the right side of the body, alternatively), followed by a creative meditation focused on Self, "The Road Home" (Răban-Motounu, 2014a), and drawing in group. At the end, they filled in the questionnaires. The ones in the control group completed the instruments as a common activity during the day, with no constraints, being motivated only by finding out the results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The descriptive characteristics of the distributions of scores on CERQ are shown in Table 1. The statistical analysis was computed using SPSS 20.0.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for each variable on both groups (control and experimental) and the t corresponding t-test for independent samples

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-test | p |
|--------------------------|-------|--------------------|--------|------|
| Self-blame | 9.36 | 3.75 | .105 | .919 |
| | 9.23 | 2.42 | | |
| Acceptance | 10.42 | 2.62 | -1.277 | .214 |
| | 11.92 | 3.37 | | |
| Rumination | 12.07 | 3.79 | -1.073 | .294 |
| | 13.76 | 4.38 | | |
| Positive reappraisal | 11.71 | 4.19 | .325 | .748 |
| | 12.23 | 4.06 | | |
| Refocusing on planning | 13.14 | 3.67 | -2.435 | .023 |
| | 16.23 | 2.89 | | |
| Positive refocusing | 13.36 | 3.85 | 1.463 | .156 |
| | 15.46 | 3.62 | | |
| Putting into perspective | 13.07 | 4.16 | -.490 | .629 |
| | 13.84 | 4.05 | | |
| Catastrophizing | 9.21 | 2.99 | 2.291 | .032 |
| | 7.00 | 1.96 | | |
| Blaming others | 7.28 | 2.87 | .349 | .730 |
| | 6.92 | 2.53 | | |

The *first hypothesis* was that people participating in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing have a higher tendency to refocus on planning than those who did not. The result of the t-test for independent samples indicates that the data confirmed the hypothesis (as shown in Table 1), the participants in the experimental condition showing a statistically significant higher use of refocusing on planning.

The *second hypothesis* was that the catastrophizing tendency is lower after having participated in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing than in persons who did not. Those in the experimental condition reported significantly lower Catastrophizing tendency.

The *third hypothesis* was that the tendency to ruminate would be significantly lower for the participants in a session of relaxation, creative meditation and drawing than for the persons who

received not treatment at all. As it is shown in Table 1, the data did not confirm this hypothesis. Also, there were no other significant differences between the two research groups for Self-blame, Acceptance, Positive reappraisal, Positive refocusing, and Blaming others

Discussions

The results indicated that significant differences were only for refocusing on planning, which increased, and catastrophizing, which was significantly lower for the person participating in the relaxation, creative meditation, and drawing exercise. The specific relaxation technique used in the experiment allowed the functional integration of the two cerebral hemispheres, according to the alternation between left and right side of the body. Afterwards, the creative meditation allowed a soft, harmonious interaction with the psychologist guiding it, who creates a safe semi-structured space and stimulates self-awareness, continued by self-expression in the drawing phase. The autobiographical memory is organized emotionally, the emotional tone of the situation acting as a trigger of past negative experiences, supported by the activation of the right hemisphere (Schulkind and Woldorf, 2005), also connected with creativity (Schore, 2019). Catastrophizing seems to be an automatic response to increase the intensity of fear, allowing the automatic triggering of actions, resources used in similar past negative experiences, ignoring the fact that their ending was self-preservation in stressful conditions, and thus, not suited in the present (they may result in inappropriate self-imposing actions in the present) It is interesting to note that the conditions of such activation offered during our experiment allowed the assimilation of the present experience of safety for self, attenuating the catastrophizing tendency (which also encourages detachment of awareness from the environment, and excessive focus on fear, past, and possible future negative actions), and, more important, a focus on self, in terms of both needs and resources (also cognitive ones) for well-being. Our results are in line with those reported by Vitalia (2016) on increasing self-efficacy by means of a metaphorical exercise, or on the interpersonal problems through metaphorical sandplay (Vitalia, 2018).

4. CONCLUSIONS

By using an exercise including relaxation, creative meditation and drawing, people may have the safe space to focus on personal needs, finding means to satisfy them, and making reasonable plans, by taking into consideration personal resources, as a self-regulation strategy. Thus, they may have the necessary energy to apply them, overcoming the negative emotional experiences.

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