

Study shows coping skills affect women's anxiety levels

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Research shows that having a strong sense of coherence and good coping skills- can help women facing adversity to overcome anxiety. The work found that women encountering difficult circumstances, such as living in a deprived community, who reported good coping skills did not have anxiety. However, women living in deprived communities but without these coping skills were at high risk of suffering from anxiety. This work, presented at the ECNP Conference, is the largest study ever conducted on coping and the anxiety that arises from facing adverse circumstances, such as living in deprivation. This study opens the possibility that teaching women coping strategies may be a way of overcoming the anxiety that stems from facing adverse circumstances, such as living in deprivation.

Lead researcher, Olivia Remes (University of Cambridge), explained

"Individuals with this sense of coherence, with good coping skills, view life as comprehensible and meaningful. In other words, they feel they can manage their life, and that they are in control of their life, they believe challenges encountered in life are worthy of investment and effort; and they believe that life has meaning and purpose. These are skills which can be taught".

The researchers, from the University of Cambridge, surveyed 10,000 women over the age of 40 who were taking part in a major cancer study in Norfolk, UK. They used health and lifestyle questionnaires to record information on living conditions, history of physical health and mental health problems, and linked that to 1991 census data to determine if the women were living in a deprived community. They also checked on each person's sense of coherence using a questionnaire developed from Aaron Antonovsky's groundbreaking work on how people find meaning and purpose in life. They found that 261 (2.6%) of the 10,000 women had Generalised Anxiety Disorder. Among women without coping skills, those living in a deprived area were about twice (98%) more likely to have anxiety than those living in more affluent communities. On the other hand, living in a deprived or affluent community made very little difference to the levels of anxiety experienced by women if they had good coping skills.

Olivia Remes commented:

"In general, people with good coping skills tend to have a higher quality of life and lower mortality rates than people without such coping skills. Good coping can be an important life resource for preserving health. For the first time, we show that good coping skills can buffer the negative impact of deprivation on mental health, such as having generalized anxiety disorder. And importantly, these skills, such as feeling like you're in control of your life and finding purpose in life, can be taught.

There is a huge number of people living in deprivation, and significant numbers have Generalised Anxiety Disorder. For the first time, we have been able to show that how you cope in life can impact

the level of anxiety you are experiencing. Of course, more work needs to be done on this, but this points us in an important direction.

Many people with anxiety are prescribed medication—and while it is useful in the short-term—it is less effective in the long run, is costly and can come with side effects. Researchers are therefore now turning to coping mechanisms as a way to lower anxiety. This is particularly important for those people who do not experience any improvement in their anxiety symptoms following commonly-prescribed therapies”.

Commenting, Professor David Nutt (Ex-Chair of the ECNP, Imperial College, London) said:

“These data suggest a trial of training in coping skills could be valuable for women lacking in them – such training needs to be developed and then a study of its efficacy needs to be carried out”.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

[Please mention the ECNP Conference in any story resulting from this press release](#)

[The European College of Neuropsychopharmacology \(ECNP\)](#)

The ECNP is an independent scientific association dedicated to the science and treatment of disorders of the brain. It is the largest non-institutional supporter of applied and translational neuroscience research and education in Europe. Website: www.ecnp.eu

The 30th annual ECNP Congress takes place from 2nd to 5th September in Paris. It is Europe’s premier scientific meeting for disease-oriented brain research, annually attracting between 4,000 and 6,000 neuroscientists, psychiatrists, neurologists and psychologists from around the world. Congress website: <http://2017.ecnp.eu/>

How this was reviewed?

There were 1003 abstracts accepted for this conference, this work was amongst the top-scoring 170 abstracts. After initial approval from the ECNP media group, the press release was developed by the press officer and the author, with the final version being approved by the ECNP media review group. We then sought an additional view and comment from someone with expertise in the field – this is the person who comments in the press release. None of the reviewers have been involved in the work.

Conference abstract :

Sense of coherence as a coping mechanism for women with anxiety living in deprivation

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Background: Generalized anxiety disorder is one of the most common anxiety disorders [1]. Although

treatment for anxiety exists, very few people who need treatment actually receive it [2]. Even after patients are treated with commonly-prescribed medication or psychotherapy, many people relapse, while some do not experience any improvement in anxiety symptoms. Research has therefore been turning to other ways of decreasing anxiety levels in people, including targeting their coping mechanisms. In a previous study, we showed that living in a deprived area significantly increased the risk of generalized anxiety disorder in women, but not in men [3]. In this study, our aim is to determine whether sense of coherence (coping mechanism) can buffer the negative impact of area deprivation on women's levels of generalized anxiety disorder. People with a strong sense of coherence view life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful and believe that daily life is a source of satisfaction [4].

Methods: We used data from over 10,000 British participants over the age of 40 years from the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer-Norfolk study. We used health and lifestyle questionnaires to capture information on socio-demographics, medical and psychiatric history, and disability. Area deprivation was measured in 1991 using Census data; generalized anxiety disorder was assessed in 1996-2000 using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth version; and sense of coherence was measured in 1996-2000 using a structured questionnaire. To determine the association between area deprivation and generalized anxiety disorder, correlated data analysis/generalized estimating equations were used, while adjusting for important covariates. The association between area deprivation and anxiety was conducted in women with a strong and weak sense of coherence, separately. The interaction between sense of coherence and anxiety was also assessed.

Results: Generalized anxiety disorder was present in 2.6% (261/ 10,185) of women. Among women with a weak sense of coherence, those living in deprived areas had a 98% higher chance of having anxiety than women living in less deprived areas (OR=1.98, 95% CI: 1.35, 2.92). In contrast, having a strong sense of coherence rendered the association between area deprivation and anxiety statistically non-significant (OR=1.29, 95% CI: 0.77, 2.18). When the interaction between sense of coherence and generalized anxiety disorder was assessed, the p-value was 0.23.

Conclusion: This is the largest, population based study to assess examine the links between generalized anxiety disorder, area deprivation, and sense of coherence. Sense of coherence, which is a coping mechanism, appears to mediate the association between area deprivation and anxiety. Among women living in deprivation, those with a strong sense of coherence (who view life as meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible) do not appear to have anxiety. Treatment for generalized anxiety disorder exists, with psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy being commonly prescribed. However, success rates are fairly low, patients relapse, and some fail to experience any symptom improvement. Costs to the health care system related to anxiety are substantial [2]. Therefore, targeting people's coping resources could represent another option for people with anxiety, including those who do not experience symptom improvement following commonly-prescribed therapies.

References available from press officer.

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