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CAN DEPRESSION AFFECT EMPATHY?

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Introduction

Empathy is the human ability to understand and share other people's feelings through knowledge, observation and memory. Lower levels of empathy lead to poor social functioning, like in Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Schizophrenia and Autism. Until today, very few studies have focused on empathic deficits in depressed patients.

Aims

Our aim was to evaluate whether MDD causes variations in empathy levels.

Objectives

We wanted to assess cognitive and affective components of Empathy in a sample of women with MDD, and relate them to clinical issues. We compared these results to a control sample.

Methods

Our sample included 20 female patients with MDD and a control group, homogeneous for age and gender. We used the Hamilton scale for depression (HAM- D) to evaluate depression severity, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to evaluate cognitive and affective empathy, the Faux pas test to assess cognitive empathy; Pearson and Mann tests for statistic analysis.

Results

In general, patients showed mild depression levels (HAM- D: 14, 41± 6, 07). Severity of symptoms and empathy levels were inversely related with Faux Pas and IRI results (R: -0, 5805; R: -0, 5145), with patients being worse than the control group. Patients showed deficits in personal distress and perspective taking IRI subscales.

Conclusions

Our study shows that in depressed patients both components of Empathy are modified; in particular, personal distress increases, while perspective taking decreases. Additional studies and higher numbers of patients will be necessary to further investigate whether empathic deficits are trait- or state-depending MDD characteristics.

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