Anxiety, hyperventilation complaints and dysfunctional breathing

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Introduction: The label 'hyperventilation complaints (HV)' is still being used to identify a patient group. However, they may also be identified as 'anxiety' or as 'dysfunctional breathing (DB)'. We studied the complaints and response to breath regulation of patients with anxiety, HV complaints or dysfunctional breathing.
Method: Data from an existing database of subjects with breathing and tension related problems, who were referred for breathing and relaxation therapy from 2006–2011, were included when they were classified under (1) anxiety (n = 254), (2) HV (n = 388) or (3) DB (n = 156) by the therapist. The individual problems at entry were categorised in a qualitative analysis by two researchers in 21 groups of complaints. Treatment outcome was evaluated as change in these complaints (strongly improved, yes/no) and with two questionnaires,
Nijmegen Questionnaire (NQ) and the General Function Questionnaire (GFQ).
Results: Anxiety and HV patients score equally high on NQ and GFQ at entry, DB patients score lower. Anxiety/panic as an explicit complaint was more present in anxiety patients (77%) than in HV (42%) and almost absent in DB (5%). Physical tension was more present in anxiety patients (50%) than in HV (25%) and DB (16%). However, the response to treatment in these two complaints was less positive for anxiety patients. Breathing problems were less present in anxiety patients (32%) than in HV patients (61%) and in DB patients (75%), but the response was equally positive (>70%).
Conclusion: Although there is large overlap, patients with anxiety, hyperventilation and dysfunctional breathing are clearly different.

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