

Opinion

Is borderline personality disorder the cause of chronic headache?

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Abstract

Patients with chronic headache are challenging for the clinician and often refractory to pharmacological treatment. Personality disorders affect up to 10% of the population, and borderline personality disorder is the most prevalent. It is characterized by a high degree of impulsivity, emotional instability, interpersonal relationship problems, fragile self-esteem, and pain distortion, which may often be the cause but not a consequence of chronic Headache.

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Introduction

Patients with chronic headache are often a great challenge for the clinician.¹ In general, pharmacological treatments are ineffective due to the absence of clinical response or side effects that make it impossible to continue taking medications. Patients frequently complain about intolerable pain, despite discrepancies between their facies and speeches.² At the beginning of our Era, Epictetus stated that what disturbs humans is not the facts per se, but the interpretation of their significance.³

The way the individual perceives his suffering is one of the critical points in the human personality. In psychology, personality disorder (PD) is characterized when the individual distorts the interpretation of any fact that happens with himself or the outside world.⁴

Personality disorder affects 10% of the general population, and borderline personality disorder (BPD) is responsible for half of this contingent.⁵ These patients present severe cognitive changes that result in a distorted interpretation of the pain signal.^{6,7} Several studies corroborate the clinical observation that chronic pain is more prevalent in BPD patients than in the general population.⁸

Some neural structures in the fronto-limbic regions are altered in patients with BPD. Studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging showed increased amygdala reactivity and reduced activity in both the prefrontal cortex and anterior part of the cingulate gyrus regions. These same regions are involved in the abnormal pain processing in chronic patients.⁹

How to identify BPD in patients with chronic headaches?

Four basic characteristics are observed in almost all of them: increased mood dysregulation, impulsivity (demonstrated as excessive spending, unsafe sex, alcohol or substance abuse, and binge eating), interpersonal relationship problems, and unstable self-image or sense of identity.^{4,10,11}

Besides that, these patients complain of chronic feelings of emptiness, make efforts to avoid abandonment, and present anger attacks without apparent reason, dissociative or paranoid crises in stressful situations, recurrent behaviors, suicide gestures or threats, or self-harming behaviors.^{4,12}

Up to 80% of BPD patients present a history of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse in childhood. Many of them suffered parental neglect and developed what is well known in psychology as insecure or disorganized attachment.¹³

The interesting issue is that psychotherapy (not the pharmacological treatment) is the central pillar in BPD treatment. This may explain the great refractoriness among patients in which chronic headache is the main complaint, and this set of underlying psychiatric symptoms are present but curiously unnoticed.¹⁴

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