Magical Thinking in Somatoform Disorders: An Exploratory Study among Patients with Suspected Allergies

Abstract:

Background: In order to reconceptualize somatoform disorders (SFDs), the psychological characteristics of SFD patients are increasingly investigated. The cognitive style of magical thinking (MT) has not been studied so far in patients with SFDs. Sampling and Methods: In a cross-sectional study, 201 allergy workup patients were interviewed using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV; they answered a set of self-report questionnaires including the Schizotypal Personality Questionnaire subscale for MT and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ). The expression of MT was explored in 61 patients with SFDs compared to 140 patients without SFDs. Results: Patients with SFDs reached higher scores of MT, also when controlled for gender, depression, and anxiety. In particular, they stated more frequently that they were believers in telepathy (64 vs. 44%) and clairvoyance (43 vs. 16%). MT correlated only weakly with somatization/somatic symptom severity, depression, and anxiety. Conclusions: Among allergy workup patients with SFDs we found considerable MT. This indicates that SFD patients may tend to mistake correlation for causality in a more general way, and not just in an illness-related context. The relation to indicators of illness severity (somatic symptom severity/somatization, depression, and anxiety) was relatively weak. Possible implications for research, diagnostics, and therapy are discussed.