The associations between somatization, alexithymia, and mental problems in adolescents

Mesut YAVUZ¹, Burcu ERDUR², Özlem KÖK²

M.D, İstanbul Aydın University, Department of Psychology; French Lape Hospital Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, İstanbul¹, Psychologist, İstanbul Aydın University, Department of Psychology²,

Abstract

To investigate the effect of alexithymic personality characteristics, and associated mental problems on somatization in adolescents. 773 students (49% female) were included. Somatic Symptom Scale Child Form, TAS-20, and SDQ were used. The mean scores of the scales between female and male groups were compared with independent sample t test. The correlations between the scales were analyzed with Pearson’s product moment correlation test. The predictability of total scores of TAS-20 and SDQ, and SDQ subscale scores on somatization scores was evaluated with multivariate linear regression analysis.The somatization scores of females were higher than males. Somatization scores were positively correlated with alexithymia, SDQ total scores, emotional problems, behavior problems, inattention/hyperactivity, and peer relation problems scores. The results of regression analysis indicated that alexithymia, emotional problems, behavior problems and age significantly predict the somatization levels. Therapeutic interventions aiming to improve of emotional identification and expressions may help us to increase the success of somatization treatment in adolescents.

Introduction

- **Somatization term:** Physical symptoms, unexplained with clear organic etiologies. The prevalance of somatization symptoms 10 % - 15 % in young population
- **Somatization in adolescent population is associated with:** Anxiety disorders, depression, sleep problems, behavioral problems, school absenteeism, problems in peer relations, decrease in social functioning .
- Alexithymia:** Problems in identifying and expressing the emotions. Lack of emphatic thinking and limited imagination. Associated with:
 - Depression symptoms and high anxiety levels.
 - Agression and impulse control disorders.
 - Addiction problems, obsessive compulsive disorder.

Objective

Is there any relationships between:
Somatization-alexithymic personality traits
Somatization mental and behavioral problems
(emotional, inattention/hyperactivity, peer relation , conduct problems)
The effect of gender on somatization

Method

Participants

Instruments

Exclusion criteria:

Diagnosed with:
Mental retardation,
learning pr. , pervasive developmental disorder
Visual or hearing pr.
Diagnosed with a chronic or acute organic illness

Results

Independent sample t test

The somatization scores of females are higher than males (Table1).

Pearson product moment correlation test:

Somatization is associated with:

- Alexithymia scores
- Emotional problems, conduct problems, inattention/hypeactivity, peer relation problems(Table2)

Multivariate linear regression analysis:

Alexithymia scores, emotional and conduct problem levels and age significantly predict the somatization scores(Table3).

- There are no significant predictive effect of inattention/hyperactivity, peer relation problems, prosocial behaviors and monthly income on somatization levels.

References

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Table1: Independent sample t test

	Female	Male	t	p
Somatization	7.26±4.78	5.99±4.88	3.65	<0.001

Table2:Pearson product moment correlation test

	Somati zation	TAS-20	SDQ	Emotional Pr.	Conduct Pr.	Inattention/hypeactivity	Peer relation Pr.
Somatization	-	415**	501**	504**	306**	284**	205**
TAS-20	415**	-	542**	460**	316**	399**	248**
SDQ	501**	542**	-	754**	604**	659**	639**

Table3: Multivariate linear regression analysis

	R ²	Adjusted R ²	β	t	p
	0.452	0.446			
TAS-20			0.159	4.61	<0.001
Emotional Pr.			0.385	11.60	<0.001
Conduct Pr.			0.174	5.65	<0.001
Age			0.167	5.68	<0.001

Discussion

Somatization : The expression of stress with somatic symptoms, instead of symbolic thinking, verbal and non-verbal communication and social activities.**Alexithymia:** Deficits in identifying and expressing the emotions, significant problems in social relations. We suggest that those deficits -which limit the processing the negative emotions with symbolic and social ways- may increase the somatization symptoms in alexithymia.

Internaizing the inattention/hyperactivity, conduct problems and peer relation problems may **increase the stress levels in adolescents withy alexithymia** and may **contribute to emerging of somatic symptoms .**

In somatization therapy, thearepeutic interventions should **include the efforts to increase of emotional awareness of individuals with alexithymic personality traits.**

E.g « My headache is getting worse now»

Therapist: It should be about the content of this session. I think your stress level has been increased when we talked about your peer relations in school. May we talk about your emotions about problems school and your peers that you told me, but in detail