



Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy For Easing Cyberchondria- A Review

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Abstract

The Internet has become an important tool in day-to-day life. Surfing for digital information about symptoms and illnesses on the Internet is very common and it leads to Cyberchondria or Internet Derived Information Obstruction Treatment (IDIOT) syndrome. Self-diagnosis based on information obtained from the Internet can be hazardous to your health. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MCBT) has been shown to be an effective supplement for persons suffering from Cyberchondria. This review will define cyberchondria and its effects, MCBT as the method for easing cyberchondria and major sessions involved in the therapy.

Keywords: Internet Derived Information Obstruction Treatment (IDIOT syndrome); Cyberchondria; Mindfulness based Cognitive Therapy(MCBT)

Introduction

With rapid improvements in internet connectivity, it is becoming increasingly common for people to access health-related information online. Internet is often given the metaphor of a double-edged sword while it has various advantages it also features disadvantages, such as addiction and depressive symptoms. The ever-increasing number of visits to health websites indicates that the Internet may have become the most popular, if not the most important source of health-related information.

Self-diagnosis usually starts with the several search engines like google, or yahoo, which can result in baffle information or data due to which people with grave clinical manifestations may not be directed to emergency treatment. Research available shows that excessive searching for health-related information online can lead to increased health anxiety. Rather than having their fears eased, users can end up being panicked into carrying out further medical information searches, resulting in a behavior pattern known as “Cyberchondria”.

What is cyberchondria?

- ✓ The term “cyberchondria” has a brief but fascinating history. Not unlike other pathologies that have been attributed to the Internet (e.g., “Internet addiction”), it was introduced and promoted by the popular media, and researchers and health care professionals became interested in it only later.
- ✓ Cyberchondria is one of the major concern now-a-days. Cyberchondria refers to the excessive and repeated digital health-related searching of information resulting in increased in anxiety. Cyberchondria, otherwise known as compucondria, is the unfounded escalation of concerns

about common symptomology based on review of search results and literature online.

- ✓ IDIOT syndrome is also recognized by means of cyberchondria, and expands with 'Internet Derived Information Obstruction Treatment'. When a person blindly trusts the information provided on the internet, and stops treatment, it is called cyberchondria, or IDIOT (Internet Derived Information Obstruction Treatment) Syndrome. It not only interferes with the doctor's decision and advice regarding the treatment but also gives birth to several myths around the topic

Prevalence of cyberchondria

- The rate of internet addiction varies from 1.5% to 25% in different populations.
- Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, cyberchondria became regular among population, as they surfed internet sites related to COVID-19 symptomatology, management etc. This can cause healthy people to become prejudiced to doubt and to experience increased anxiety about their health. The prevalence of cyberchondria was 55.6%.
- A recent study describing a development and initial validation of the Cyberchondria Severity Scale reported that cyberchondria was a multidimensional construct with the following five components: compulsion, distress, excessiveness, reassurance, and mistrust of medical professionals (McElroy and Shevlin, 2014). "Compulsion" refers to an unwanted aspect of performing online health searches, which interferes with functioning in multiple ways. "Distress" denotes negative emotional states and physiological reactions associated with online health searches, such as difficulty relaxing and sleeping, worrying, anxiety, distress, tendency to panic, irritability, and loss of appetite. "Excessiveness" pertains to the time-consuming and repetitious nature of online health searches, with one or multiple sources often being consulted. "Reassurance" refers to seeking reassurance from a medical professional. "Mistrust of medical professionals" suggests an inner conflict as to whether a person should trust his or her own doctor or the results of the Internet searches

Causes and triggers of cyberchondria

- ✚ Bad experience with a medical professional that caused a lack of trust and confidence in medical professionals
- ✚ Prone to anxiety in general
- ✚ Heightened awareness of bodily sensations
- ✚ Close relative affected by cyberchondria
- ✚ History of chronic or acute trauma or tragedy
- ✚ Requiring more attention from family members or friends
- ✚ Long-term unmanaged stress
- ✚ Any significant life stressors

Signs and Symptoms of Cyberchondria

The main characteristics of cyberchondria are that the person is concerned about having a serious illness despite having only minor (EMADS) or no symptoms

- ❖ E: Excessive time used to search online
- ❖ M: Mistrust of medical professionals whose advice could be obtained in person.
- ❖ A: A compulsive, unwanted searching for information
- ❖ D: Distress caused by the searching behavior, including worry and panic
- ❖ S: Seeking reassurance from a qualified person or source.

For a single symptom, such as a headache, the Internet can lead the person to the diagnosis of a brain tumor,

which only increases anxiety in the person, and without the help of any medical professional, it can lead to depression.

Lauckner and Hsieh reported that searching for health information online results in negative emotional outcomes like the feeling of overwhelm and fright. Muse *et al.* conducted a study among students using different questions to check their anxiety levels and found that the participants who were in the high anxiety group were using more Internet for health information than those in the low anxiety group.

How Cyberchondria affects our health?

- ❑ Like illness, anxiety disorder and general anxiety, cyberchondria can influence a person's quality of life, particularly if it is severe.
- ❑ Daily tasks can become more challenging when you're experiencing terrible anxiety. Stress levels can increase because of anxiety.
- ❑ Physical signs of stress and anxiety might include headaches and high blood pressure.
- ❑ Additionally, anxiety can harm your friendships and family ties and harm your career if you end up missing too many days of work for medical appointments.

Relationship between cyberchondria and health anxiety

- ❖ As already noted, it is usually assumed that there is a strong relationship between cyberchondria and health anxiety or hypochondriasis (which usually refers to a more severe form of health anxiety). After all, the term “cyberchondria” is directly derived from hypochondriasis
- ❖ Studies have demonstrated that higher levels of health anxiety are associated with more Internet use to search for health-related information (Baumgartner and Hartmann, 2011; Muse *et al.*, 2012). This increased use of the Internet refers to a greater amount of time spent online looking for medical information, greater frequency of performing online health searches and a higher likelihood of searching for greater quantity and greater variety of medical information online
- ❖ These findings suggest that people with prominent health anxiety, perhaps contrary to their expectations, do not tend to experience relief when they go online and do not feel reassured from medical information obtained on the Internet.

Methods to ease cyberchondria

Research has been done to determine the effectiveness of psychotherapy for the symptom identified as “health anxiety.” The following are some types of therapy which have been identified as effective treatments for health anxiety

- **The use of mindfulness in cognitive therapy (MBCT)**

For individuals with health anxiety, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) has been shown to be an effective supplement to “standard services.”

- **Rational emotive behaviour Therapy**

It has been demonstrated that rational emotive behaviour therapy is useful in teaching people how to react correctly to clear or murky signals coming from their bodies.

- **Medication**

The obsessive thoughts associated with Cyberchondria, and Illness Anxiety Disorder have been successfully managed with medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY?

“Thoughts have meaning, so every thought is the tip of an iceberg,” says Jonathan Shedler, a Colorado psychologist.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is a type of therapy born from the union of cognitive therapy and meditative principles.

- *Cognitive therapy* aims to help clients grow and find relief from symptoms of mental illness through the modification of dysfunctional thinking
- *Mindfulness* can be summed up as the practice and state of being aware of our thoughts, feelings, and emotions on a continuous basis. Mindfulness also contributes to an acceptance of the self as it is, without attaching value judgments to our thoughts

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is a group-based treatment program that combines mindfulness meditation practices with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

MBCT is derived from the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine and creator of the mindfulness-based stress reduction technique, which is often used in meditation and yoga practices.

MBCT helps people:

- **Be aware:** Become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations
- **Relate differently:** Learn to relate to their thoughts and feelings as passing events
- **Disengage:** Disengage from automatic dysfunctional cognitive routines
- **Develop a new relationship:** Develop a new relationship with the modes of mind that contribute to mood disorders
- **Live life differently:** Cultivate mindfulness to learn new skills and ways of working with their mind

MBCT is based on the idea that negative, automatic patterns of thinking and behaving can easily trigger and escalate into a depressive episode.

Techniques in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy builds upon the principles of cognitive therapy by using techniques such as mindfulness meditation to teach people to consciously pay attention to their thoughts and feelings without placing any judgments upon them.

There are a number of mindfulness techniques and exercises that are utilized as a part of MBCT. Some of these include:

- **Practice guided or self-directed meditation** that helps them gain a greater awareness of their body, thoughts, and breathing.
- **Body scan exercise:** This involves lying down and bringing awareness and attention to different areas of the body. People usually begin at their toes and move up through the body until they reach the top of the head.
- **Mindfulness practices:** Mindfulness involves becoming more aware of the present moment. It's something that can be practiced during meditation, but people can also incorporate these activities into the things they do every day.
- **Mindfulness stretching:** This activity involves stretching mindfully to help bring awareness to both the body and mind.
- **Yoga:** MBCT may also encourage people to practice different yoga poses that can help facilitate mindful stretching of the body.
- People might be taught what's known as the "**three-minute breathing space technique**," which focuses on three steps, each one minute in duration:

1. Observing your experience (How are you doing right now?)
2. Focusing on your breath
3. Attending to your body and physical sensations

Other CBT mindfulness techniques include walking and sitting meditations, sitting with thoughts, and sitting with sounds

Conclusion

As the influence of internet on lifestyle and health choices are undeniable in this modern and digital era, all the information is now available at our fingertips and it has led many of us to seek health advice from the internet. This can cause healthy people to become prejudiced to doubt and to experience increased anxiety about their health and leads to cyberchondria. Patients should seek professional help rather than using Dr. Google because there is a high risk that they will misdiagnose themselves, purchase inappropriate drugs, or use home remedies for treatment without having all of the facts.

The combination of mindfulness and cognitive therapy is what makes MBCT so effective in dealing with cyberchondria. Specifically, it was hypothesized that teaching MBCT would result in decreased overall hypochondriac symptoms, with specific reductions in the frequency and believability of health-related ruminations. It was also hypothesized that there would be improvements in quality of life after the intervention.

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