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Title: STRUCTURED PSYCHOTHERAPY IS BENEFICIAL FOR REDUCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IN ADULTS PATIENTS WITH CHRONIC RHEUMATIC VALVULAR HEART DISEASE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A CASE REPORT

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Background & Aims: Psychotherapy is effective in the relief of psychological distress associated with chronic incapacitating illnesses. Individuals who have a diagnosis of rheumatic valvular heart disease for the first time during adulthood, go through a range of negative emotions including fear, helplessness, hopelessness and anxiety. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) little concern is given to this aspect of their care. This is especially so because without corrective surgeries or procedures it is a progressive disease which is associated with complications and physical limitation.

We report process and effect of structured Cognitive Behavioural therapy (CBT) on an adult with chronic Rheumatic valvular heart disease (RVHD).

Methods: In-person CBT was delivered to Mr I.I., 52 year-old teacher with diagnosis of chronic RVHD complicated by heart failure eight months earlier. Six sessions were planned. The first session consisted of CBT and supportive psychotherapy. It consisted of a systematic exploration of his beliefs about the illness, the negative thoughts he had about himself and his future as a result of the diagnosis as well as negative feelings associated with diagnosis and his symptoms.

Patient expressed deep concerns about his symptoms and how they limited his physical and sexual function. He expressed deep sadness and helplessness associated with his inability to afford definitive surgical management. He questioned the benefit of medications at all since he had been told illness was irreversible in the absence of surgical correction.

Psychotherapeutic methods were employed to reduce negative thoughts, embrace more positive thoughts, gratitude journaling and instill hope while guarding against unrealistic treatment expectations.

Results: Psychotherapy is not usually administered to patients with chronic heart diseases as part of their care in Nigeria and most parts of SSA. After the first session of CBT and supportive psychotherapy, the patient was more optimistic about his current medical treatment, was more ready to adhere more to the laid out treatment plan of his cardiologists and looked forward to having a surgery if possible to alleviate symptoms. After suggestions of potential sources of financial support for his definitive treatment that he could explore, he was highly motivated to try them. These include applying for state government support through his member of parliament, applying for a slot in a foreign-sponsored open heart surgery mission in a larger city about 350km away from his residence, and applying to local non-governmental organisations for support. He also had less intense feelings of helplessness and sadness associated with his symptoms. He reported that he looked forward eagerly to the subsequent sessions of CBT and supportive psychotherapy.

Conclusions: Structured psychotherapy using appropriate psychotherapeutic techniques is important in instilling hope and balancing expectations in adult patients with chronic rheumatic valvular heart disease. As such, we recommend holistic management which include psychiatrists and clinical psychologists as a part of a multidisciplinary management team for these patients.