

The effects of acceptance and commitment therapy on social anxiety and body image in women with obesity

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Introduction

Obesity is a chronic and progressive disease that is associated with low quality of life and life expectancy, low psychological functioning, social isolation, anxiety, depression, limitation of physical activity, and long-term concerns about physical health. Women with obesity are exposed to many psychological problems such as social anxiety disorder and low body image. Social anxiety disorder is a marked or severe anxiety of social situations in which one is evaluated by others. Many studies have highlighted the higher prevalence of anxiety disorders in obese women than men. One of the variables related to social anxiety is the body image. Body image is the distorted perception, behavior and cognition associated with weight and appearance. People with obesity evaluate their body unhealthier compared to their peers; they are not satisfied with their body and suffer from inappropriate body image. In addition, a negative physical image can lead to health problems inherent in obesity, inclusive of stress and behavioral changes (such as unhealthy weight control behaviors). In recent years, development in treatment of psychological disorders and obesity has led clinical psychologists to design new approaches including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). In this intervention, instead of changing cognition, the psychological relationship of an individual with his thoughts and feelings is increased. Thus, this treatment helps clients to achieve a more valuable life through increasing the psychological flexibility. Previous studies have not focused on the effects of this treatment on social anxiety in

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women with obesity; however, research has shown that ACT has been effective on the symptoms of patients with social anxiety disorder. Likewise, in prior studies, the effect of ACT on the improvement of the body image in women with obesity has been confirmed. The purpose of the present study is to examine the effectiveness of ACT on social anxiety and body image of women with obesity.

Method

The research method was quasi-experimental (pre-test, post-test with control group). In this research, all women with obesity (106 women) were evaluated psychologically by census sampling method. Forty-eight women among them had symptoms of social anxiety and undesirable body image and 30 of them were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The Social Phobia Inventory (17 items) and Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (46 items) were used for collecting data. ACT was administered to experimental group in 8 sessions (increase motivation and provide a rationale for treatment, challenging the control, learning and doing techniques of diffusion, learning and training techniques of mindfulness, absorbing the self as a context, the concept of value and identification of the life values, practical solutions to remove the barriers of values, summing up the meetings and reviewing them). Data were analyzed by Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA).

Results

By controlling the pre-tests, results of MANCOVA indicated that ACT has been effective on decreasing the social anxiety symptoms (social anxiety, avoidance, physical symptoms) and improving the body image (appearance orientation, fitness evaluation, subjective weight, body areas satisfaction) of women with obesity ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusions

According to the obtained results, ACT was suggested for improving psychological problems of women with obesity, especially social anxiety and body image. The lack of follow-up and not comparing the effectiveness of ACT with other psychological therapies were the limitations of this study.

Keywords: ACT, body image, obesity, social anxiety