ABSTRACT

Research has attempted to improve therapeutic outcomes and help clients cope with negative events. Psychoanalytic theory uses defense mechanisms to explain the unconscious ways in which people cope. Hope is another concept commonly studied by clinical psychologists to better explain people's varying ability to cope. This study looked at how individual defense mechanisms and hope influence change in negative affect following recollection of two events, one academic and one relational, that resulted in negative outcomes during the past year. Negative affect was measured before and after recall to measure affective change. Multiple regression analyses were calculated to measure the main effects of hope and individual defense mechanisms (projection, isolation, altruism, and anticipation) on change in negative affect. Results showed that hope had a main effect in all regressions, with higher hope resulting in lower levels of negative affect at time two. Projection was the only defense mechanism that had a main effect, with higher levels of projection leading to higher levels of negative affect. While psychodynamic theory emphasizes the importance of individual defense mechanisms in coping, these results suggest that only certain defense mechanisms have a role in change in negative affect. While more research is needed, this could suggest that coping may have less to do with defense style and more to do with hope.

INTRODUCTION

People often seek therapy for stress, interpersonal problems, and overall poor mental health. Defense mechanisms are one way that psychoanalytic theory tries to identify underlying unhealthy coping strategies behind maladaptive behaviors. Clients with diagnoses such as panic disorder have been effectively treated by increasing their use of mature defense styles, changes in defense style that remain after one year (Heidt, E. et al., 2007). Hope is also strongly tied to therapy, as high hope correlates with low levels of stress and high levels of wellbeing (Kwon, 2002).

Defense mechanisms are involuntary “patterns of feelings, thoughts, or behaviors that . . . arise in response to perceptions of psychic danger” (Vaillant, 1992) that can be separated into three categories: mature, immature, and neurotic. Mature defenses integrate reality, interpersonal relationships and private feelings in order to cope with life in adaptively. In contrast, immature defenses are ways of coping that often result in avoidance of stressful situations by placing the blame externally. Neurotic defenses may appear more as individual quirks and can be changed with brief psychotherapy, as they are not as detrimental to personal relationships. The individual defense mechanisms analyzed within this project were (DSM-IV-TR, 2000):

• Projection (immature): attributing one’s own negative thoughts and feelings to another
• Isolation (immature): separating emotions from an unpleasant event so as to not experience the negative emotions.
• Altruism (neurotic): coping through the gratification received serving others.
• Projection (immature): coping through the gratification received serving others.

Hope is defined as goal-oriented behavior based on past success and belief that there will be continued success in the future (Snyder et al., 1991). Research has revealed that hope helps people cope with stressful situations and can affect mental health. For instance, a positive correlation has been found between hope and self-esteem in adults (Curry, Snyder et al., 1997). Research has revealed that hope helps people cope with stressful situations and can affect mental health. For instance, a positive correlation has been found between hope and self-esteem in adults (Curry, Snyder et al., 1997).

The present study examined the main effects of hope and individual defense mechanisms on change in affect following the retelling of recent negative events. We hypothesized that immature defense styles (projection and isolation) would result in increased negative affect. People high in neurotic and mature defense styles (altruism and anticipation, respectively) were hypothesized to show smaller increases in negative affect. We hypothesized that higher levels of hope would result in smaller increases in negative affect following the recollection of recent negative outcomes, independent of defense mechanism type.

METHOD AND ANALYSES

97 students from undergraduate psychology courses at Washington State University completed a survey for class credit that included a task in which participants described two events within the past year, one academic and one relational, that resulted in negative outcomes and were asked to describe ways in which the event has turned out differently. Affect was measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS: Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) before and after this task to measure change in affect. The Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ: Andrews et al., 1989), containing 88 questions, was used to measure individual defense mechanisms. Correlations were used to choose defense mechanisms: projection, isolation, altruism, and anticipation. Hope was measured using the Domain Specific Hope Scale (DSHS). Participants completed the Academic, Social, Family and Romantic domains of the DSHS and labeled their relational events’ domain. The academic and relational domain were added together for a total hope score. Regression analyses were performed to calculate the main effects and possible interactions of hope and individual defense mechanisms on change in negative affect.

RESULTS

As predicted, hope showed smaller increases in negative affect independent of defense mechanisms. Projection was the only defense mechanism found to have a significant main effect, with higher levels of projection resulting in greater increases in negative affect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

• Those high in hope were found to have smaller increases in negative affect after recollection of negative events in all regressions.
• Projection was found to have a main effect on negative affect, while the other defense mechanisms had no significant effect.
• The results of this study suggest that hope should be a main focus in therapy when attempting to cope with negative outcomes; however, the importance of defense mechanisms cannot be ruled out until further research has been conducted as it is unclear whether other defense mechanisms would have more of an impact in a therapeutic setting.

REFERENCES


