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The Mediating Role of Emotional Inhibition on the Relationship between Emotion Awareness Levels and Life Events with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome

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Extended Abstract

Aim

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a syndrome that occurs after experiencing one or more traumatic events. PTSD is characterized by an increase in stress and anxiety following a stressful event or accident, sometimes accompanied by persistent dissociative symptoms (Knobler & Abramowitz, 2022). Exposure to traumatic life events (such as domestic violence and sexual abuse) may reduce emotional awareness by affecting the understanding and conceptualization of emotions. Low emotional awareness is correlated with many forms of psychological pathology. Two potential pathways can explain these connections. First, low emotional awareness may impair the ability to regulate emotions and feelings. Second, since low emotional awareness is associated with greater difficulty in recognizing emotions and feelings in others, it can disrupt social functioning and, in turn, contribute to various forms of psychological pathology (Weissman et al., 2020). According to Barańczuk (2019), individuals who lack emotional awareness resort to avoidant strategies and suppression of their thoughts and emotions to distance themselves from negative experiences. Carew et al. (2013) also believe that individuals, aiming for self-regulation and emotional regulation, especially in managing emotionally charged thoughts, resort to thought suppression.

It appears that individuals exposed to adverse life events, due to insufficient emotional capacity and low emotional awareness stemming from non-acceptance of these events, are unable to effectively cope with these events. Consequently, instead of confronting these events, they avoid them and exhibit emotional inhibition. In such conditions, emotional inhibition, which prevents the proper processing of negative thoughts and emotions related to these events, seems to predispose individuals to experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms. The present study aims to investigate the mediating role of emotional inhibition in the relationship between levels of emotional awareness, life events, and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Methodology

The research method is applied and descriptive-correlational. The study's statistical population included all individuals who referred to counseling centers in Khorramabad, Doroud, and Boroujerd in 2019-2020. From this population, 400 people (283 women and 117 men) were selected through convenience sampling.

Research tools included:

- Kellner's Emotional Inhibition Scale (EIS) (Kellner, 1986)

- Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS) by Lane and Schwartz (Lane & Schwartz, 1987)
- Life Events Checklist (LEC-5) by Weathers et al. (Weathers, Blake et al., 2013)
- PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) (Weathers, Litz et al., 2013)

The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling, and the fit of the measurement model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis, AMOS 24.0 software, and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation.

Findings

The research findings revealed that the total path coefficient (the sum of direct and indirect path coefficients) between levels of emotional awareness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is negative and significant at the 0.01 level ($\beta = -0.274$, $p < 0.01$). The total path coefficient between life events and PTSD is positive and significant at the 0.01 level ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the path coefficient between emotional inhibition and PTSD is positive and significant at the 0.01 level ($\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.01$). The indirect path coefficient between life events and PTSD is positive ($\beta = 0.131$, $p < 0.01$), while the indirect path coefficient between levels of emotional awareness and PTSD is negative ($\beta = -0.096$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, emotional inhibition mediates the relationship between emotional awareness levels and PTSD negatively, and it mediates the relationship between life events and PTSD symptoms positively and significantly.

Conclusion

In line with previous research findings (Moroni et al., 2021; Versluis et al., 2021; Pasardi et al., 2019; Naderi et al., 2016), it can be concluded that the low scores of patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in emotional awareness indicate significant difficulties in understanding their own emotions and feelings. These patients also struggle with recognizing and comprehending emotions in interpersonal relationships and expressing emotions. Experiencing traumatic and life-threatening events leads to negative and distressing emotions. Individuals with low emotional awareness or those who use strategies such as emotional disengagement to cope with negative emotions and feelings show more symptoms of PTSD (Ogłodek, 2022). Numerous studies have shown that life events can predict PTSD (Karatzias et al., 2020; Heir et al., 2019), which is consistent with the current study's findings on the direct effect of life events on PTSD. Emotional inhibition, as an emotion regulation strategy, can mediate the relationship between life events and PTSD, aligning with the results of other studies (Chung, Simmons et al., 2018).

To explain these findings, it can be stated that experiencing traumatic events can negatively impact emotion regulation skills by disrupting the central and autonomic nervous systems. This disruption leads to impaired arousal regulation and stress response (Demers et al., 2015), thereby exacerbating PTSD symptoms. Therefore, psychotherapists and experts in the field can focus on examining life events, emotional awareness, and emotional inhibition to help reduce PTSD symptoms.

Keywords: Emotion Inhibition, Emotion Awareness Levels, Life Events, Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Ethical Considerations

In the present study, informed consent and the right to choose and exercise control were observed. Additionally, the objectives of the research, the method of execution, and the duration of the study were explained.

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Conflict of Interest

According to the authors' declaration, there are no conflicts of interest in this article.

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