

The Experience of Scleroderma, Stressful Life Events, Attachment, Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms and Resilience.

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Short Summary of the Findings

Aim

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between psychological factors that may impede functioning of the immune system and Scleroderma. These factors included stressful life events and the aspects that may result from exposure to these stressors, such as insecure attachment, anxiety disorders, (such as post traumatic stress) depression and resilience. Several other factors such as a change of lifestyle, type of Scleroderma and pituitary adenoma were also investigated.

Participants. Two hundred and eighty three individual's, from Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America completed the Scleroderma questionnaire.

Findings

Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms and the onset of Scleroderma. Seventy percent of participants reported having experienced Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms before being diagnosed with Scleroderma and 31.5% reported currently experiencing these symptoms. Participants also reported significantly higher rates of Stressful Life Events, Depression and Anxiety Disorders (before diagnosis of Scleroderma) and Pituitary Adenoma's than that reported in the general population.

Stressful Life Events and Insecure Attachment were significant predictors of Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms, before diagnosis of Scleroderma and therefore may be influential in the prognosis, but not Severity of Scleroderma.

Scleroderma Severity. Severity of Scleroderma symptoms was predicted by Depression and/or Anxiety Disorders and Low Resilience in the total Scleroderma sample.

Findings for Limited and Diffuse Sclerosis found different predictors for Severity of Scleroderma. For Limited Sclerosis those who reported Low Resilience and a diagnosis of Anxiety and/or Depression had more Severe Scleroderma Symptoms, while those with Diffuse Sclerosis who reported a Diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Exposure to the Stressor when diagnosed with Scleroderma had more Severe Scleroderma Symptoms.

Lower Severity of Scleroderma. A number of people who reported a Change of Lifestyle and a reduction in Scleroderma Symptom Severity stated they had experienced less stress by changing or ceasing stressful employment situations or moving out of stressful relationships (psychological stressors). Others reported changing how they cared for themselves to reduce exposure to cold (Raynauds: physical stressors).

Recommendations

It is recommended that those participants who reported currently experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms (questions about how they felt after experiencing a stressful life event), Depression and Anxiety speak to their doctor to obtain a referral to a psychologist. The scale (see the comprehensive overview) used in this questionnaire measures PTSD symptoms only and is not a diagnosis of PTSD. A psychologist will be able to assess your symptoms and verify diagnosis. Stress Management Counselling and Positive Lifestyle Changes are also recommended as these techniques may be beneficial in reducing Severity of Scleroderma Symptoms. A comprehensive overview of the findings, implications and recommendations is attached.

Acknowledgements

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Best Wishes

Karen