Stuck in Mind
The role of Catastrophizing in Pain

av

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Abstract


Pain catastrophizing emerges in the literature as one of the most important psychological determinants of both pain itself and the negative outcomes commonly associated with it. However, despite decades of research confirming the impact of catastrophizing, there are still areas that remain unexplored or in which the surface has only been scratched. The overall aim of this dissertation was to expand existing knowledge about catastrophizing and to advance the theoretical framework around the concept.

The role of catastrophizing was explored in three distinct areas: during pain in childbirth, in exposure treatment for back pain patients, and in a problem solving context. The findings from the three studies confirmed the vital role of catastrophizing in these areas. Firstly, catastrophizing played a critical role in pain in childbirth; women who catastrophized reported labor pain as more intense and the subsequent recovery period as longer than women who did not catastrophize. Secondly, catastrophizing was identified as a moderator of treatment effect in exposure in vivo for back pain patients with pain-related fear; patients who catastrophized were not helped by the exposure. Thirdly, catastrophizing played a role in a problem solving context; although this is in line with contemporary models such as the misdirected problem solving model, the results suggested a somewhat different pathway to this previous model. Taken together, these findings underscore the instrumental role of catastrophizing in diverse areas and imply a need for catastrophizing to be assessed and addressed in clinical contexts. In addition, the findings highlight a need for further development of the theoretical framework around catastrophizing as well as treatment interventions that directly target catastrophizing.

Based on these needs, a new model of catastrophizing was proposed – a model of catastrophizing from a process perspective. In this model, the proposed function of catastrophizing is to down-regulate negative affect, as a form of internal avoidance. The model is a complement to existing theoretical models and provides a framework for developing treatment interventions that directly target catastrophizing, for example by problem solving skills training. Successful interventions for people who catastrophize would lead to several gains – for the individual in less suffering and increased ability to handle pain problems, and for society as a whole in reduced costs for health care for these individuals.

Keywords: catastrophizing; pain; fear avoidance; problem solving.