

Thinking about thinking: Innovative Methods to Improve Mentalization in a Client with Borderline Personality Disorder

K Dharani Devi, Poornima Bhola, A Preethi Ninan, Harini Gunasekaran and
M Urvakhsh Mehta

National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore

Developmental psychopathology models of borderline personality disorder (BPD) have linked early attachment vulnerabilities with reduced capacities for mentalization and consequent disturbances in psychological and interpersonal functioning. Addressing impairments in the ability to understand the mental states (e.g. emotions, needs, thoughts, intentions) of one self and others, is an emerging focus in therapy for BPD. This case report illustrates the process of 32 sessions of individual therapy with a 26-year-old woman diagnosed with BPD. 'Concrete mentalization' and 'pseudo-mentalization' were some of the prominent styles of thinking observed in the client. Techniques to address her hypersensitivity to perceived rejection and her difficulties in understanding the intentions of others were introduced as an adjunct to Dialectical Behaviour Therapy. Innovative methods such as story-telling, comic strips and roleplays were used to enhance mentalization and were associated with increased client engagement and gains in therapy. The challenges experienced and therapist reflections on the therapy process are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Borderline Personality Disorder, mentalization, psychotherapy.

Impairments across emotional, cognitive, behavioural and interpersonal domains are characteristic of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) (Sansilow et al., 2002; Sharp & Vanwoerden, 2015; Skodol et al., 2005; Zanarini, Frankenburg, Hennen, Reich, & Silk, 2005).

These difficulties in affect regulation, impulsivity as well as problems in the interpersonal interaction seem to manifest even in the early developmental phases. Several models describe the development of BPD symptoms based on early experiences during formative years; including attachment frameworks (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1973), the biosocial theory (Linehan, 1993), and psychodynamic approaches (Adler, 1985; Kernberg, 1975, Mahler & Kaplan, 1977). The mentalization based approach, proposed by Fonagy & Luyten (2009), places disruptions in the acquisition of mentalization, as critical processes in the pathway towards adult psychopathology. Mentalization, the ability to

understand the cognitive and affective aspects of the mental states of both the self and others, is acquired in the crucible of early attachment, and facilitates effective navigation of our social world. In a seminal article, Fonagy (1991) discussed difficulties in "thinking about thinking" and in forming a realistic and reasonable picture of feelings, beliefs, desires and intentions, among persons with borderline personality disorders. These problems result in impairments in the capacity for self-awareness, the regulation and transformation of one's own emotions and in interpersonal interactions, which might be characterized by interpersonal antagonism, suspiciousness and impulsivity (Minzenberg, Poole & Vinogradov, 2006).

Research has explored mentalization deficits among persons with borderline pathology, using a range of task-based measures and self-reports. Studies indicated difficulties in the accurate recognition of emotions from facial expressions (Fenske et al, 2015; Domes et