

STRESS INOCULATION AND SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

Stress Inoculation emerged out of an attempt to integrate the research on the role of cognitive and affective factors in coping processes with the emerging technology of cognitive behavior modification. It has been employed on a treatment basis to help individuals cope with the aftermath of exposure to stressful events and on a preventative basis to ‘inoculate’ individuals to future and ongoing stressors (Tucker-Ladd, 2005).

Stress Inoculation is a flexible individually-tailored multifaceted form of cognitive-behavioral therapy. In order to enhance an individual’s coping skills and indeed, to empower the individual to use already existing coping skills, an overlapping three phase intervention is employed.

Phase I

In the initial conceptualization phase a collaborative relationship is established between the clients and the therapist (Bell, Kreidler, Longo, & Zupancic, 2000). A Socratic-type exchange is used to educate the client about the nature and impact of stress and the role of both appraisal processes and the transactional nature of stress, i.e., how

the client may inadvertently, unwittingly, and perhaps, even unknowingly, exacerbate the level of stress that s/he is experiencing. The client is encouraged to view perceived threats and provocations as problems-to-be-solved and to identify those aspects of his / her situations and reactions that are potentially changeable and those aspects that are not changeable. The client is taught how to 'fit' either problem-focus or emotion-focus to the perceived demands of the stressful situation. The client is also taught how to breakdown global stressors into specific short-term, intermediate and long-term coping goals.

As a result of interviewing, psychological testing, client self-monitoring, and reading materials, the client's stress response is reconceptualized as being made-up of different components that go through predictable phases of preparing, building up, confronting, and reflecting upon the reactions to stressors (Foa & Meadows, 1997). The specific reconceptualization that is offered is individually-tailored to the client's specific presenting problem, e.g., anxiety, anger, physical pain, etc. As a result of a collaborative process a more hopeful and helpful model is formulated; a model that lends itself to specific intervention.

Phase II

The second phase of Stress Inoculation focuses on skills acquisition and rehearsal that follows naturally from the initial conceptualization phase. The coping skills that are taught and practiced primarily in the clinic or training setting and then gradually rehearsed *in vivo* are tailored to the specific stressors that the client may have to deal with, e.g., chronic illness, traumatic stressors, job stress, surgery, sports competition, military combat, etc. The specific coping skills may include emotional self-regulation,

self-soothing and acceptance, relaxation training, self-instructional training, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, interpersonal communication skills training, attention diversion procedures, using social support systems and fostering meaning-related activities (Bell, Kreidler, Longo, & Zupancic, 2000).

Phase III

The final phase of Stress Inoculation provides opportunities for the client to apply the variety of coping skills across increasing levels of stressors, the inoculation concept as used in medical immunization or in social psychology is used to prepare individuals to resist the impact of persuasive messages. Techniques such as imagery and behavioral rehearsal, modeling, role-playing, and graded *in vivo* exposure in the form of 'personal experiments' are employed. In order to further consolidate these skills the individual may even be asked to help others with similar problems (Maag, 1992). Relapse prevention procedures, i.e., identifying high risk situations, warning signs, and ways to coping with lapses, attribution procedures, i.e., ensuring clients take credit for and appropriate ownership by putting into their own words the changes that have taken place, and follow-through, i.e., booster sessions, are built into Stress Inoculation Treatment.

Endemic Stress

Stress Inoculation also recognizes that the stress that an individual experiences is often endemic, institutional and unavoidable. As a result, Stress Inoculation has often helped clients to alter environmental settings and or worked with significant others in altering environmental stressors. Stress is transitional in nature and there is a need to not

only work with clients to bolster and nurture flexible coping repertoires, but it is also necessary, on some occasions, to go beyond individual and group interventions and to adopt a community based focus.

Stress Inoculation has been conducted with individuals, couples, and groups. The length of intervention varies from being as short as 20 minutes for preparing patients for surgery to 40 one hour weekly and biweekly sessions administered to psychiatric patients or to individuals with chronic medical problems. In most instances, Stress Inoculation consists of some 8 - 15 sessions, plus follow-up sessions, conducted over a 3 to 12 month period.

Stress Inoculation and Spirituality

Spiritual comfort / guidance are considered to be components of coping repertoire skills / tools. Spiritual / religious beliefs, activities, prayers, readings, participation in liturgical services or rituals, and participation in faith communities are examples of religion / spirituality as coping strategy (Bagley, 2003).

From an Orthodox Christian perspective, and building upon the internal and external stimuli upon which an individual can act in inappropriate ways, St. Philotheus (in the twelfth century) proposes a map of the cycle of reaction to stress, from which an individual moves from the point of the initial stimulus to self-defeating or inappropriate behaviour / reactions. St. Philotheus's cycle identifies the following process:

1. *Prosvoli* (provocation): *Prosvoli* is the initial incitement and is often referred to as an 'image-free stimulation of the heart'. These provocations are the product of external (spiritual) stimuli. The individual has no power to prevent

these provocations but has the power to maintain *nepsis* (watchfulness) to guard against them.

2. *Pararripismos* (momentary disturbance): *Pararripismos* is a momentary disturbance of the intellect. It occurs without any movement or working of passions / emotions. It is cognition by the intellect of the provocation. It may be referred to as 'taking note' of the provocation. St. Philotheus teaches that the individual can, at a certain point of spiritual growth, avoid momentary disturbance.
3. *Syndyasmos* (coupling): At this point, without entirely assenting to the provocation, the individual may begin to 'entertain' it. This means to converse with it, turning it over in his / her mind, but still not acting upon it. The provocation at this point is no longer 'image-free'. It has become *logismos* or thought.
4. *Synkatathesis* (assent): This goes beyond mere *syndyasmos*. Instead of toying with the *logismos*, the individual now resolves to act upon it.
5. *Prolipsis* (prepossession): This is a state of prejudice that is the result of repeated reactions / behavior that predispose an individual to yield to a particular reactive behavior. The individual develops a history of following the path of a given reaction. In principle, s/he retains his / her free choice and can reject provocation, but in practice, the force of his / her habit makes it more and more difficult for him / her to resist.
6. *Pathos* (passion): This word signifies that which happens to a person or thing, an experience undergone passively. Therefore, a passion is an appetite or

impulse, such as anger, that violently dominates the soul. At the stage of 'passion', the habit developed in the stage of prepossession moves from being a way of life to being literally a compulsion.

Spiritual Interventions

Having identified the causes of the cycle of reaction to stress, from which an individual moves from the point of the initial stimulus to self-defeating or inappropriate behaviour / reactions, a series of interventions are mooted to address the same. These interventions follow the path of the classic triad of *ascesis* (practice / discipline), *hesychia* (stillness), and *nepsis* (watchfulness). It is often difficult to divide any one intervention into any single aspect of the classic triad, since one does not occur in the absence of the others.

The most confusing of these to Western readers is *hesychia* (stillness). Rather than using the literal translation of the Greek word as 'stillness' it would conceptually be more correctly translated as 'focus'. The concept of *hesychia* includes practices designed to focus the entire being upon God. The triad of *hesychia*, *nepsis*, and *ascesis* have to be understood in their holistic sense. It is virtually impossible to correctly practise one without correctly practising simultaneously the other two. The hesychastic practice of the '*prayer of the heart*', for example, is much more than just the repeating of a mantra. It involves the practices of *nepsis* (watchfulness) and *ascesis* (discipline) without which, the mantra is just a vain repetition. This could include, but is not limited to, prayer, scripture study and reading, worship, spiritual meditation, and St. Philotheus's eschatological principles of remembrance of death and final judgement.

In most Western literature on Orthodoxy, *hesychia* is so strongly identified with the recitation of the '*prayer of the heart*' that the necessity for the holistic practice of the triad gets overlooked. There are elements, which could also be identified as *ascesis* or *nepsis* that are essential to the proper practice of *hesychia*. To clearly understand St. Philotheus's interventions it is important to understand *hesychia* as 'focus'.

St. Philotheus's interventions for stress inoculation can be grouped into three basic types: 1) interventions that correct wrong thinking; 2) interventions directed at developing correct self-esteem; and 3) interventions directed at development of self-control or self-discipline. All of these interventions are designed to pre-empt the process of the cycle of reaction to stress at a point prior to the individual's moral involvement.

Interventions Correcting Wrong Thinking

The largest number of interventions offered by St. Philotheus involves correction of wrong thinking. St. Philotheus proposes an intervention that attempts to curtail wrong thinking at its very origin, at the point of the provocation. He recommends use of the practices of the unceasing '*prayer of the heart*', keeping watch with the intellect, and keeping true remembrance of God to ward off momentary disturbance. This type of intervention is designed to be preventative, and would require considerable practice on the part of the individual to develop. St. Philotheus states that keeping watch with the intellect, 'we should slaughter all the sinners of the land' (Psalm 101.8), i.e., of our mind. Given over in the intensity of our ecstasy to the constant remembrance of God, we should for the Lord's sake 'cut off the heads of the tyrants' (Habakuk 3.14), i.e., to say, should destroy hostile thoughts at their first appearance.

St. Philotheus addresses the whole concept of challenging internal self-talk and our thoughts. Calling thoughts and self-talk the ‘soul’s chatter’, St. Philotheus points out that this destroys what we build up and scatters what we labour to gain. His intervention is to challenge the thoughts and keep them in check, not letting them run wild over neurotic ideologies, creating doubts by raising and dwelling on false ‘if’s’.

St. Philotheus proposes watchfulness, or a conscious awareness of what we think and say to ourselves in self-talk as an intervention. Again he recommends not dwelling on thoughts of things that are not necessary for us to do what we must do to advance towards God. Thus, we are to use a focus on our goal, using the methods of *hesychia* such as prayer, and remembrance of death and judgement, to become one with God, as a measure of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate thought. To achieve this, St. Philotheus points out that self-control is needed. Using this type of watchfulness, based on challenging our thoughts and self-talk, using the teachings given to us by God as the measure, we not only adequately react to stressors but obtain a spiritual reward.

Interventions Directed at Developing Correct Self-Esteem

Correct self-esteem is based on understanding and accepting the true relationship between God and man. The rule of measure is not the ideas of the world, but the individual’s actual standing in relation to God. In this, St. Philotheus teaches that pride is the destructive force that leads to false self-esteem, and that humility is the healing force that brings a true sense of self-esteem.

St. Philotheus proposes an intervention of working to make ourselves each day in our behavior, as we should be when we appear before God in judgment. Humility plays

an important position in interventions to correct self-esteem. Humility prevents our taking offence and gives us a realistic view of our self and the world around us. In order to obtain humility, both recurrent prayer and remembrance of God that is established through *nepsis* is necessary. Where humility is combined with the remembrance of God, i.e., established through *nepsis* and attention, and also with recurrent prayer inflexible in its resistance to the cycle of reaction to stress, there is the place of God.

To overcome pride, requires guarding the intellect with humility, remembering our place before God. Guarding the intellect requires much humility, first in relation to God and then in relation to others. In the absence of humility and self-reproach, we obtain a wrong self-esteem, one in which we presume a position of false superiority. St. Philotheus explains that in the absence of self-reproach and humility, spiritual knowledge puffs us up, making us feel superior to others.

Interventions Directed at Development of Self-Control and / or Self-Discipline

The final series of interventions that St. Philotheus proposes, involve issues of developing self-control through incremental goals. This aspect of intervention is most strongly related to the concept of *ascesis* and the development of a habit of disciplined lifestyle as an intervention to disrupt the cycle of reaction to stress, from which an individual moves from the point of the initial stimulus to self-defeating or inappropriate behavior / reactions. Centered in this, is the Orthodox practice of fasting. Fasting in the Orthodox tradition is more of an abstinence from certain foods that are considered toxin and precursors of passions / emotions, than it is a total abstaining from food and drink.

Fasting, in the Orthodox East, has always been the most obvious and common form of ascetic practice. A common axiom in the East is, 'If you cannot practice self-control over something as simple as what you choose to eat, how can you practice self-control over more complex matters?'

To the Westerners, the Orthodox concept of fasting is often misunderstood. The purpose is not sacrifice, but discipline to strengthen the spirit, so that the mind and the heart begin to dwell on the things not of this world. Its benefits include increased spiritual strength, true obedience to God and total patience with one's fellow man. It assists the individual to take control of his / her lower appetites that involve the physical senses and to become mentally alert and sensitive to what is happening all around him / her. Moreover the individual's understanding of life is also expanded.

Fasting is referred to as the 'second gate of entry to the noetic Jerusalem', with *nepsis* being the first gate, and mindfulness of death being the third gate. Here again the triad of *ascesis*, *nepsis* and *hesychia*.

Finally, as a matter of self-control, St. Philotheus encourages a commitment to cure. The individual seeking healing needs to commit to the course of therapy, even when s/he finds it will often be difficult to carry out some of the interventions. Smoke from wood kindling when lighting a fire troubles the eyes, but then the fire gives light, warmth, and gladness.

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