

4th International Conference on

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Management

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A reconceptualization of depression as a psychic autoimmune disease

Statement of the Problem: The attack against the self and massive self-destruction that we see in depressive individuals elicits the question, why do people (i.e., the Self) allow it to happen? Researchers have linked individual depressive symptoms to immune activation biomarkers; others found evidence that many genes identified as risk alleles for depression were also associated with immune factors related to pathogen host defense. The "infection-defense" hypothesis proposes that immune vulnerability to infection elicits depressed mood. Autoimmune diseases and infections are risk factors for subsequent mood disorder diagnosis. In autoimmune disease, the body's defense system attacks healthy tissues rather than threatening invaders. Freud's Project for a Scientific Psychology attempted to define mental processes in neurological terms. Solan compared the process of the healthy narcissistic immune system in the self to the activity of the biological immune system.

Purpose & Method: The purpose of this study is to focus on the role of the psychic immunological system as related to the unbearable emotional pain inflicted by the acknowledgement of reality, disappointment, guilt, anxiety or aggression. A comparison is made between a healthy process versus clinical depression. Moreover, the defense mechanisms underlying depression including their processing and links to the psychic immune system, are examined. Furthermore, the study has elaborated their goals and their primary and secondary gains for the individual as they relate to the destruction of the self.

Conclusion & Significance: Theoretically, there is a wide spectrum or continuum between how the healthy psychic immune system copes with loss (e.g., sadness, sorrow, grief) and depressive phenomena (in its various forms). Depression is understood as functioning like a psychic autoimmune disease against the self.

Recommendation: This reconceptualization of depression as autoimmune disease can explain the process of attack against the self and self-destructive behavior. It may provide an important metaphor to work-through in treatment.

Recent Publications

1. Stieglitz B C et al. (2015) Depression as sickness behavior? A test of the host defense hypothesis in a high pathogen population. *Brain Behavior and Immunity*. 49:130-139.
2. Raison C L and Miller A H (2012) The evolutionary significance of depression in Pathogen Host Defense (PATHOS-D). *Mol. Psychiatry*. 18(1):15-37.
3. Anders S, Tanaka M and Kinney D K (2013) Depression as an evolutionary strategy for defense against infection. *Brain Behavior and Immunity*. 31:9-22.
4. Benros M E et al. (2013) Autoimmune diseases and severe infections as risk factors for mood disorders. a nationwide study. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 70(8):812-820. Doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.1111.
5. Solan R (2015). The enigma of childhood. the profound impact of the first years of life on adults as couples and parents. Karnac. pp. 339-340. ISBN: 978-1-78220-211-0.

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Biography

Anat Ben Artsy is a MA licensed Clinical Psychologist, Psychodynamic Psychotherapist and Supervisor at Schneider Children's Medical Center, Israel. She has worked with civilians (children and adults) in distress following damage to their homes during times of war. She has years of experience in psychotherapy in children, adolescents and adults, as well as teaching and supervising in hospital and education settings – Tel-Aviv University and Bar-Ilan University. She focuses on the reconceptualization of depression. This reconceptualization of depression as a psychic autoimmune disease facilitates a significant improvement in psychotherapy. Using this reconceptualization illuminates the process of the attack on the self and massive self-destruction manifested in depression. She found some support for the above from biological research regarding the connection between depression and autoimmune disease.

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Notes: