

Effects of Anthroposophic Therapeutic Speech on Primary Dysmenorrhea

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Abstract:

Many young women suffer from dysmenorrhea, or painful menstruation. Traditional medicine offers no definitive cure except radical surgery, and often treats the symptoms with powerful drugs and/or hormones. This paper describes a study, which examines the use of Anthroposophic Therapeutic Speech (or ATS) to alleviate the symptoms of primary dysmenorrhea. Therapeutic Speech, a form of art therapy, was developed from out of the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Five subjects were taught a series of exercises to help them cope with painful cramps. Although the sample was small, initial results are very promising. Further study should be undertaken.

Introduction:

As many as two-thirds of all women suffer from mild to intense menstrual cramps each month. Very few women have told their doctors about this pain. Primary dysmenorrhea seems to be a socially accepted part of menstruation, although the cramps and other symptoms are often so strong that women are not capable of performing daily activities. Each woman suffering from dysmenorrhea finds her own way to attempt to cope. If she dislikes taking medicine and does not wish to take oral contraceptives or Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDS), the two most commonly prescribed traditional remedies, she must find her own effective analgesic for those few miserable days every month. This project is a preliminary investigation into the curative effects of ATS on primary dysmenorrhea.

It was very interesting to discover in my research that the accepted theory for the cause of menstrual cramps comes from the prosta-"gland"-in. According to Steiner, gland-organs are under the influence of the etheric body. [Hassauer] It is during the second half of the month that the etheric body begins to retreat and the astral body and Ego-organization become more active in the deterioration and discharge process. When the etheric body is not strong enough and the astral body is too strong, the etheric body is forced to retreat all the way, thus allowing the astral body to take direct hold of or hit against the physical body. "As a result, exceptionally uncomfortable pain can arise, in the form of period cramps." [Hassauer] When this occurs, then it can be assumed that the etheric body is forced out of the process of prostaglandin production. *Is it possible that since the etheric body is forced out, that too many prostaglandins are produced?*

Hypothesis:

I have undertaken this preliminary study to determine whether ATS may be useful for women with intractable primary dysmenorrhea. Based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophic Therapeutic Speech treats ailments ranging from a lisp to depression. Healing moves through the breathing by working with the spoken word. The therapist determines exercises, out of a picture of the four-fold human being, to address particular symptoms.

Primary dysmenorrhea is an indication that the menstrual cycle is not functioning in a rhythmic way. The etheric body needs to be strengthened, the astral body must be freed from the physical, and the Ego-organization must harmonize the cycle. This may be accomplished with the use of Anthroposophic Therapeutic Speech exercises, and the pain of primary dysmenorrhea thus reduced or eliminated.

Method:

Experiment:

I found five women who were willing to participate in the experiment. Three had never done anything with ATS or Artistic Speech Formation. I met with each woman individually to have a preliminary discussion. They answered questions about the history of their menstrual cycle and I introduced the first exercises.

I met with the woman, a few more times, to see how their exercises were coming, made corrections and answered questions. At the end of the four months, I met individually with each woman, to determine results and to interview her about the process. The women were asked twelve main questions which focused on the overall process and implementation of the exercises. The questions also addressed the difficulties and asked for suggestions for improving the program.

Speech Exercises:

The exercises may be divided into two sets: those done in the first half of the menstrual cycle, and those done in the second half. In the first half of the cycle, on day six, when the bleeding has subsided and the estrogen phase begins, the etheric can be supported and built up through the sequence of speech exercises: "In the vast unmeasured world wide spaces" in four stages [written by R. Steiner and developed by Dietrich von Bonin] and "U".

"In the vast unmeasured world wide spaces":

Stage 1 Pacing from wall to wall: The subject places one hand flat on the wall with the arm outstretched. The other arm is raised above the head, forming a half circle. As the arm is raised, the subject is told to breathe in through her mouth. She then should begin to stretch out her arm and reach it toward the other wall, while walking. The speech begins with this process. The hand reaches the opposite wall when the line of text is finished.

Stage 2 The speech is "pushed down" and the arms are raised to chest level: The subject stands with both arms hanging at her sides. The arms are raised until they reach chest level, with hands facing down and elbows in towards the torso. As the arms begin to move down again, the subject begins to speak the line of text. When the line is finished, the arms should be in the hanging position. She inhales again as she again raises her arms to chest level, lowering them as she repeats the next line.

Stage 3 Sitting in a chair: Both hands face down, resting on the legs. As she inhales, the subject lifts one arm above her head until it is fully extended. As the arm is lowered, she speaks the line of text. The speech is timed so that the last word is spoken as the

hand touches the leg. She repeats with the other arm. The voice is soft and articulation should become an intimate experience.

Stage 4 Silent: The subject silently recites the whole verse with eyes closed, staying in rhythm but remaining still.

”U”: The subject stands and reaches both arms over her head. As she lowers her arms, she speaks a long ”U” sound, bringing it down through the whole body. Repeat approximately seven times, or until the ”U” vibrations are felt in the lower abdomen region. After this sequence of exercises, the subject is instructed to rest for at least five minutes.

In the second half of the cycle, approximately five days before menstruation begins, some women may experience feelings of aggression and mood swings. This is a sign that the astral body is beginning to have free reign. This strength can be released in an artistic way instead of being held in. I chose a poem by Christian Morganstern which allows the speaker to use a great deal of breath. The poem is about a person who, fed up with his hometown, is saying good-bye to everything there. The poem can be spoken very loudly and with great antipathy. Once the cramping begins, the subject needs something that can help to release the cramps, while harmonizing the body. Hexameter does just that. If spoken while walking in rhythm, hexameter may have a soothing and harmonizing effect. [Bettermann H, von Bonin D, Cysarz D, Frühwirth M, Moser M]

An excerpt of the women’s experiences, as reflected in the questionnaires:

How was the process of doing the program?

Subject 1:

I did it for two months. I was much quieter than usual and it had a releasing and relaxing effect. I felt different. It wasn’t as if everything was all on one day, it was more spread out. Everything became warm and enlivened.

Tell me how your period was month by month during the experiment?

Subject 2:

What is most evident, and what I would contribute to the exercises, is that it has become more regular, more balanced. I wouldn’t say that the pain has decreased, but what has changed is that I don’t have to throw up anymore. The last three times I didn’t throw up. It’s great! In general I am more conscious of that region of my body. During the first day of my period I usually have a lot of gas, and pain in my thighs. That has gotten better too.

How would you rate your overall improvement?

Subject 3:

There was improvement but mainly there is an overall awareness that has really affected me. Also knowing when my period starts and when I am pre-menstrual I now have the distance to say, ”Yes, this is pre-menstrual tension it’s not just me being pissed off at someone or having a bad day.” Being able to sense that.

How bad was the pain prior to the experiment?

Subject 4: [Subject 4 was the only woman who practiced every day!]

There was a time when I was nineteen or twenty when I couldn't do anything when I had my period, I could only lay on the bed. I had to take painkillers. I started by only taking a few and then over time I had to take more and more. Then I had to even buy a stronger type of painkiller. At some point I decided I had had enough and I tried to just drink a lot of chamomile tea and then to go back to taking the weakest pain killer.

How was the process of doing this program?

Subject 4 :

My first impression was that I was very enthusiastic to do it. I really set out to do it every day as a kind of exercise. Now it is part of my morning. It is part of my daily rhythm. I have done it every day for the past four months except when I had a bad cold. In the beginning, right after I did the exercises I had to go to the toilet and do a bowel movement. But now it's not like that any more. Since I am doing this exercise I am able to bring more consciousness into this region of my body.

Did you rest after doing them?

Subject 4:

Yes, I always rest for five minutes.

What did you experience while doing the exercises?

Subject 4:

I don't know if I am answering in the right way but I just feel that what I am doing is that I am somehow giving energy or bringing into balance what is happening here [lower abdomen.] It is somehow a kind of meditation for me. You have because of the four steps: to be open and then to come down and then to sit and go inside. I feel very good doing it. I don't do it any more because I have to do. Maybe in the first days it was like that but not now.

Tell me how your period was month to month during the experiment.

Subject 4:

The first month I had a lot of pain. My period was the same as it had been in the quality of bleeding. A lot of blood came and some of it was in pieces. It didn't really flow. I also had migraines all the time. There were many new things that I began to pay attention too. I don't remember if I took pills or not. I couldn't even do the hexameter because it was when I was sick with a cold. Then next month I had cramps too. I tried to give them the time for the process like you said to do. I remember walking. I didn't have the Novalis text with me so I just tried to walk in rhythm. I did it for about fifteen minutes and it helped. But then when I stopped the pain came back. When I got home, I got the text and did it again and the pain went away. But then in the night the pain came back and I took a pain killer. In the second month the blood wasn't as thick, it flowed better. In the third month I had no cramps, none at all. I was very excited. The blood was flowing well. I was walking

a lot in the woods. It was a good atmosphere. Because I had no cramps I almost forgot I had it. It was just normal to be with my period.

Subject 5

Subject 5 was diagnosed with secondary dysmenorrhea by a gynecologist. Although she did find the exercises helpful, her results are not included in this project.

Results:

Each woman experienced an improvement in her cycle through doing this experiment. To what extent the symptoms were reduced depended on how regularly she did the exercises. Subject 3, the only one who did the whole program, had no cramps by month three. Subject 2, who did the exercises only sporadically, did not vomit the last three months of the exercise. The fact that every woman was able to say that her period became more regular, shows that the etheric had been strengthened. Each shared as well that she now has a new awareness of her body through doing the exercises.

Discussion:

It seems clear that the exercises were effective. What was essential in the process was to do the exercises as regularly as possible. The Morgenstern poem may have been too difficult for the women to begin with. A more simple speech exercise, such as "Ketzer Petzten" from R. Steiner, could have been done instead. The sequence of "In the vast unmeasured" and "U" not only is an important rhythmical process, but is a tool for calming, quieting, centering. The rest after the exercises also is essential.

Prior to the study, the women seem to have had very little consciousness of their relationship to their cycles. I believe that a large part of the success of the experiment was that the women took the time to pay attention to their bodies and particularly to their menstrual cycle, which was mediated through speech. They all felt good doing something specifically for themselves, and enjoyed being given permission to rest and listen to their body.

For most of the women, the most difficult challenge was finding the will to follow through on the commitment to doing the exercises on a daily basis. They all enjoyed doing the exercises when they did them, but often found other things to do or just had trouble making and keeping a routine.

Practical Implications: The most important thing for a future project would be to meet with the women on a more regular basis. Setting up weekly sessions to meet with each woman likely would encourage her to do the exercises more frequently. With such a small sample, it is difficult to evaluate the results of the study quantitatively.

However, qualitative evidence gathered from the interviews shows that this program has a real promise for those who suffer from dysmenorrhea. Further study should be undertaken, with a larger sample, and with more frequent meetings, in order to determine its true effectiveness. Since I learned that most women do not tell their doctors about their cramps, I would encourage or require women to be examined by a gynecologist, before beginning the study. This would also rule out secondary dysmenorrhea.

Given the dearth of reasonable and effective options for dealing with the pain of menstrual cramps, and the safety and relative simplicity of using Anthroposophic Therapeutic Speech techniques, more study is recommended.

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