

Treatment of Tourette's and Tic Disorders

The goal of treatment for patients with Tourette's Disorder is to identify what symptoms if any require treatment. The diagnosis of Tourette's by itself does not warrant pharmacological treatment, however there are often associated symptoms and problems that occur in individuals with Tourette's disorder. Some common associated conditions that are seen are obsessions and compulsions (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), ADHD, Learning difficulties, behavioral problems, and impulsiveness.

Treatment of Tourette's syndrome should not have a primary goal to completely eliminate all of the tics and other symptoms that the patient is currently experiencing. The goal instead should be to relieve the discomfort or shame that accompanies the tics for the person. Individuals with Tourette's rarely seek out psychological treatment unless the tics are interfering with their ability to function academically, socially, or personally.

Most individuals that have a tic disorder do not require medication for their tics, however patients with other disorders that accompany their tic disorder such as OCD often do require medication management. There are a variety of treatment options available for individuals with tic disorder and they involve Habit-Reversal Therapy (HRT), Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Alternative Treatments such as herbal medicines or nutritional supplements, or numinous therapy which involves a therapy that involves the spirit and not the body. There are a variety of treatment options available and it is up to the patient to decide which treatment will work best for them.

The focus of my treatment with patients uses either mirror therapy, HRT or CBT, as a mental health professional treatment for patients focuses on getting at the root of the behaviors. In using mirror therapy, the patient observes their particular tics in the mirror and observing how others view the motor or vocal tics. By doing so, the patient will be motivated to work on changing the motor or vocal tics in psychological treatment. This is a good place to start treatment.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy involves using a diary of all unwanted behaviors whether the tics are vocal or motor and identifying the negative thoughts and feelings that may be causing the behavior. Only when the patient is able to identify the thoughts that may be causing the tics are they able to modify the behavior by substituting it with a behavior that is more acceptable. CBT should be used only under the directed guidance of a physician or a mental health professional that is knowledgeable about the treatment of Tourette's Disorder. In addition, CBT utilizes relaxation techniques as part of the modification of the tic behaviors in order to relieve the stress that triggers or exacerbates the tics. Reducing stress or managing it is key to using CBT for Tourette's Disorder.

Habit-Reversal Therapy (HRT) is a behavioral therapy used to treat tics. This treatment also involves keeping a diary charting the frequency of each tic and the duration of each tic. In treatment, the patient describes the tic in detail to the therapist and the therapist tells the patient each time a tic is observed. Remember, to change the unwanted behavior (tics) the patient has to be aware of what, when they occur. As a therapist, we tell the patient less and less when the tic is occurring and over time only cuing them subtly when they occur. Therapy focuses on making the patient aware of when they are having tics and in being aware of what makes them better or worse.

HRT also utilizes relaxation training and in using deep breathing techniques, progressive relaxation, visual imagery, and other techniques that are used in treating anxiety disorders, we are able to decrease the frequency of the tics. Tics are almost always exacerbated by stress or anxiety. Relaxation techniques are always taught at the very first session when using CBT or HRT.

The next step in treatment using HRT is to teach a competing response to replace the tic. For example, in patients that have a vocal tic, we practice deep breathing for several minutes immediately after each tic and also after the “urge” that a tic is going to occur. In effect, this is reversing the pattern of the tic behavior and replacing it slowly with something else. In a motor tic such as head jerking, the patient is taught to put their chin down and flex the muscles in their neck, which is the exact opposite in essence of jerking their head back and forth.

Of course, the family is utilized in treatment to observe and point out when tics occur and also they are incorporated in treatment. Therapy with patients with Tourette’s or a tic disorder involves the therapist working with the patient on their feelings/emotions as a result of how the tics affect their life. Therapy will also focus on how to reduce stress and plan activities that will lower or not exacerbate their stress level. The patient will have to practice, practice, practice, the competing responses in order to reverse the tics until the competing response is done correctly. As always, the patient will have to self-monitor when they are not with the therapist and keep a journal or log of the tic behaviors. Without awareness and active participation from the patient, tics will not be lessened or eliminated. The goal of treatment should never be to completely eliminate all tics, because this is not always feasible for all patients as some patients will have tics persist into adulthood. Families should also be educated on understanding exactly what Tourette’s syndrome is and how to help the family member manage the symptoms and the effects on their life.

The issues that frequently bring children in for treatment of Tourette’s Disorder are not the tics themselves, but the rejection of their peers, the embarrassment of the tics when observed by others, school and learning problems, how to explain Tourette’s to family or friends, and how to “fit in” with their peers. Tics for children/adolescents usually brings about shame; embarrassment as they are trying to cope with the symptoms of Tourette’s.

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