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# Plasticine therapy as a method of psychotherapy in prevention of emotional burnout syndrome in the professional activity of doctors

Today, the emotional burnout syndrome is mentioned in many research papers. The emotional burnout is the emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged human exposure to occupational stress. This syndrome mainly occurs in people of communicative professions. The article discusses the results of a study on the prevention of emotional burnout and support of mental health of doctors. Plasticine therapy is proposed as one of the "softest" and still the deepest methods of psychological treatment of emotional burnout.

**Keywords:** plasticine, emotional burnout, psychotherapy.

**Introduction.** In daily medical practice, medical workers are under constant influence of traumatic factors including the organizational structure of their working process, a psychological pressure from the patients, their relatives, colleagues and managers. All this can ultimately result in deformation of personality in the form of emotional burnout that consequently influences the social and family relations, affects the work conflicts, or labour efficiency [1].

Emotional burnout has a negative impact on somatic health. It increases the risk of coronary heart disease as is evidenced by the total level of cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein, glucose, triglycerides, and uric acid, as well as electrocardiographic changes. In men, it also preceded the changes in blood cholesterol level 2-3 years later; in women, the level of blood lipids (cholesterol and triglycerides) correlated positively with emotional burnout, but negatively – with physical fatigue. The emotional burnout syndrome also increased the leukocytes adhesion / aggregation level what could be due to mechanical obstruction of capillaries. The emotional burnout syndrome is accompanied by violations of regulation in the "hypothalamus – pituitary – adrenal glands" system.

The emotional burnout syndrome has the following social consequences: the quality of performance is deteriorating, a creative approach to solving problems is lost, the number of conflicts at work and at home is growing, the employee is frequently absent, might change the job or profession. The number of paraprofessional errors is rising. People with a burnout have a negative impact on their colleagues as they contribute to more interpersonal conflicts, and also break work assignments. Thus, the burnout can become "contagious" and spread through informal interactions at work [2].

Today, practicing psychologists all over the world use various practical tools: metaphorical cards, sand play, fairy tale therapy, and much more. Plasticine therapy is one of the most effective techniques that was studied by M.V. Kiseleva, A.I. Kopytin, L.D. Lebedeva, E.V. Tararina, and others [3].

This article considers plasticine therapy as one of Art Therapy techniques for prevention of emotional burnout syndrome of doctors and support of their mental health

and proposes the results of questioning of doctors of the regional oncology dispensary on the topic of professional burnout.

**Materials and methods.** *Participants of the study.* The emotional burnout syndrome and its severity were studied using the MBI burnout questionnaire. The study was conducted on the basis of the Mangistau Regional Cancer Dispensary and included doctors of chemotherapy, palliative care, and surgeons (n=19).

*MBI Burnout Questionnaire.* The technique (questionnaire) was developed by American psychologists K. Maslach and S. Jackson to measure burnout in man-to-man occupations. The applied variant has been adopted by N.E. Vodopyanova [5].

The questionnaire consists of 3 scales: "emotional exhaustion" (9 statements), "depersonalization" (5 statements), and "reduction of personal achievements" (8 statements). The answers of the subject are scored: 0 points - "never", 1 point - "very rarely", 3 points - "sometimes", 4 points - "often", 5 points - "very often", 6 points - "every day".

Emotional exhaustion is expressed by a feeling of fatigue and devastation. Emotions become faded, people feel that they cannot feel the range of feelings that they used to. In general, in the professional sphere (and then in the personal sphere) negative emotions – namely irritability and depression prevail.

Depersonalization is characterized by the perception of people rather than as individuals, but as objects, communication with them is without emotional involvement. The attitude to the patients becomes soulless and cynical. Contacts become formal and impersonal.

Reduction of personal achievements is characterized by the fact that a person doubts his professionalism. Achievements and successes in the workplace are seemed insignificant, and career prospects are unreal. Indifference to work appears.

*The method of plasticine therapy.* Plasticine therapy allows harmonizing the inner state of the person through the development of his/her ability for self-expression and self-consciousness. This is a form of Art Therapy and involves modelling not only from coloured plasticine, but also from salt test, clay, and etc. According to scientists

and practicing psychologists, Art Therapy techniques can “visualize” interpersonal conflicts to support their effective resolution [4].

The advantages of plasticine therapy include:

- efficient solving of psychological problems;
- psychological diagnostics of the doctor’s condition;
- the ability to dissociate from the problem and to look at it from a different angle;

- Immediate immersion into a problematic situation and the ability to quickly transform the negative state into a positive experience.

This method allows actualizing the problem of the doctor and to work not only with emotions and feelings but also with deep psychological problems. An essential advantage of plasticine is its ability to remove resistance and tension. Though there is a stereotype objection to using plasticine when working with adults this method is suitable for all ages, as well as both for individual and group therapy (Figures 1-3).

It is worth reminding that only the patient (the doctor, in this case), and not the psychologist, can interpret and assess the resulting “work of art”. Working with plasticine during therapeutic session allows expressing in a symbolic form and investigating the repressed feelings, thoughts, dreams, to resolve intrapersonal conflicts, to drag out the stuck affects. This is mainly through the perception of the metaphor of plasticine, “Everything can be changed!”

Contraindications for plasticine therapy include:

1. Mental disorders with productive somatic manifestations;

2. Severe depressive disorders;

3. Psychosomatic diseases in the stage of exacerbation;

4. Personal intolerance to plasticine.

There is a huge variety of psychotechnics with the use of plasticine. Plasticine is a unique material; it can be used in combination with other methods of psychocorrection and psychotherapy. For example, its use enhances the effectiveness of sand play, fairy tale therapy, mandala therapy, mask therapy and other methods of working with the subconscious [6].

**Results and discussion.** The questioning of doctors revealed the following results by the scales: 14 (74.2%) of the respondents had emotional exhaustion, 3 (15.6%) – depersonalization, 2 (10.2%) – the reduction of personal

achievements. The obtained data demonstrated those internal and external factors that had the most negative impact on the professional activities and other spheres of life of the doctors.

*Internal factors related to personal characteristics:*

- Professional experience;
- Work holism;
- Orientation to the result;
- Desire to control everything;
- Idealized expectations of work and life in general;
- Characteristics of the character.

*External factors:*

- A large amount of work;
- Monotony of work;
- Responsibility for the results of the work performed;
- Irregular schedule;
- Information load;
- Interpersonal conflicts; the lack of proper moral and material compensation for the work performed;
- The need to work with a heavy contingent of patients;
- Emotional involvement in patients’ problems;
- Incorrect organization of work;
- Lack of time for rest;
- Constant criticism, etc.

In fact, the doctors’ activity is closely related to emotional oversaturation, strong psychophysical stress, a high probability of various stresses. Doctors bear the “burden of communication,” they are under the constant impact of other people’s negative emotions. They serve either as a shoulder to cry on, or as a “target or punch bag” for splash of aggression and discontent, criticism. Accordingly, the doctors are forced to protect themselves psychologically from their patients. Thereby, they become less emotional, more indifferent to other people’s problems, so as not to provoke a burnout syndrome.

A psychologist working with medical staff can use plasticine therapy to help them avoid an increasing emotional burnout.

*Purpose of the session:* learn a new way to relieve tension, stress, fatigue; “Spill out” negative energy in a safe way and transform it into a positive one; to harmonize the emotional state; deeper understand yourself; to feel a surge of creativity.

*Materials:* plasticine, paper, simple pencils, music and fantasy of the participants.



**Figure 1** – Fragment of the session “Working with emotional burnout of a psychologist using plasticine”: the doctors sculpt their emotional states



**Figure 2** – Fragment of the session “Working with emotional burnout of a psychologist using plasticine”: the result of expressing the emotional state of doctors



**Figure 3** – Fragment of the session  
«Working with emotional burnout of a psychologist with the use of plasticine»: teamwork

**Instructions:**

1. Cure your emotional state.
2. “Talk” with him, telling him everything you want.
3. Transform it (you can very roughly) into what you want.
4. Prepare many balls of different sizes from any plastic material.
5. Closing your eyes, mold out any of these balls.
6. Make a group composition on a given topic in a short time.

**Exercise:** The group sits around the table, participants are offered a map paper, plasticine and graphite pencils. Instructions are given, after which the participants begin the task.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Is it easy to perform the exercise?
2. What difficulties do you encounter while completing the assignment?
3. Does the disagreement arise during the work?

After the “plasticine session”, the results by scales were reduced: emotional exhaustion – 26.8%, depersonalization – 5%, the reduction of personal achievements – 10.2%. The analysis showed a significant effect of plasticine therapy in the correction of emotional burnout so the technique could be used by a psychologist dealing with professional burnout of doctors. According to the feedback after the session, the method was new for the respondents. Most of them emphasized its usefulness and the use of the acquired knowledge in everyday life.

**Conclusions**

1. The conducted questioning allowed identifying the internal and external factors that contribute to the negative consequences of work connected to communication with people, and also the level of emotional burnout of doctors.
2. The advantage of plasticine therapy is that the doctor can transform the created pieces as many times as

needed until he/she achieves a full peace of mind. That is why this therapy has a great potential. Techniques of using plasticine allow exploring the problem of the doctor at a safe distance, allow trying out new behaviours.

3. Working with a plasticine piece of art helps the doctor to take responsibility for his/her own life, contributes to the development of adequate behaviour. All techniques of plasticine therapy help the doctor to reveal his/her internal resources and apply them in the future.

Thus, plasticine therapy is a simple but very powerful method of psychotherapy that allows achieving mental balance, solving complex problems, finding the answer to the question of interest [6].

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