The Impact of Psychological Functioning upon Systemic Sclerosis Patients’ Quality of Life

Thomas N. Hyphantis, MD, PhD,* Niki Tsifetaki, MD, PhD,†
Vassiliki Siafaka, PhD,‡ Paraskevi V. Voulgari, MD, PhD,§
Christina Pappa, MD, MSc,*, Marina Bai, MSc,§ Kalliopi Palieraki, MSc,‘
Ailiki Venetsanopoulou, MD,‖ Venetsanos Mavreas, MD, PhD,** and
Alexandros A. Drosos, MD, FcR††

Objective: To access health-related quality of life (HRQOL) in systemic sclerosis (SSc) patients using the World Health Organization Quality of Life Instrument, Short-Form (WHOQOL-BREF), and to identify the association between clinical, psychopathological, and personality parameters and SSc patients’ HRQOL.

Methods: Fifty-six patients with SSc were compared with 72 patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), 43 with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), 34 with Sjögren syndrome (SS), and 74 healthy controls. A wide range of clinical information was collected and the following self-report instruments were used: the WHOQOL-BREF, the General Health Questionnaire, the Symptom Distress Check List, the Hostility and Direction of Hostility Questionnaire, the Defense Style Questionnaire, and the Sense of Coherence scale.

Results: HRQOL perceived by SSc patients was significantly impaired compared with healthy controls. Initial examination of HRQOL across groups of rheumatology patients revealed similar HRQOL, but when age, pain, psychopathology, and coping strategies were taken into account, SSc patients had impaired physical health QOL in comparison with RA, SLE, and SS patients. Arthritis-related pain was closely associated with SSc patients’ HRQOL. Elevated psychological distress symptoms as well as certain personality traits, such as maladaptive defenses and lower sense of coherence, were also associated with diminished HRQOL.

Conclusions: Impaired psychological functioning is associated with diminished HRQOL in SSc, and consequently, treatment of depressive symptoms should be considered a priority. Moreover, assessment of HRQOL should only be used in conjunction with specific psychological distress measurements, to detect the influence of psychopathology on HRQOL.

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