

A Review of Drug Dependence on Psychopathology

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Abstract: While physical dependence on substances like opioids and benzodiazepines is well-known, psychological dependence is an underappreciated yet important phenomenon. Psychological dependence refers to a subjective craving or perceived need for a medication, often accompanied by anxiety about stopping it. This mental process can occur even with medications that do not produce physical dependence. Understanding the psychological factors that contribute to dependence is critical to promote appropriate medication use and prevent misuse. This paper explores the mechanisms underlying psychological dependence, the specific risks, and negative impacts it can have, and potential strategies for assessment, prevention, and treatment of this dependence.

Keywords: Psychological dependence, physical dependence, anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Physical dependence on certain medications occurs when the body has adapted to a substance being present, resulting in physiological withdrawal symptoms when it is abruptly discontinued. However, many individuals also develop psychological dependence - a perceived mental need or craving for a medication, often driven by factors like beliefs, conditioning, habit, and expectations. While psychological dependence does not involve physiological withdrawal perspective, it shares some characteristics with substance use disorders and can reinforce physical dependence through anticipatory anxiety about discontinuation.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL VS PHYSICAL DEPENDENCE :

Physical dependence occurs when the body has adapted to a substance being present, resulting in withdrawal symptoms when it is discontinued. Psychological dependence is a mental process driven by factors like belief in the need for the substance, habit, and associating the substance with relief. Both can reinforce each other - the fear of withdrawal can increase psychological cravings.

Psychological dependence is particularly concerning because it can occur even with medications that have no physiological dependence potential. Sleep medications, stimulants for energy/focus, opioid pain relievers, anti-anxiety agents, and antidepressants are all prone to causing psychological cravings and perceived need in some individuals. Importantly, this psychological dependence is not necessarily an indicator of abuse or intentional misuse - it can develop during normal, prescribed use of a medication with mood-altering properties.

3. MECHANISMS CONTRIBUTING TO PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE :

While psychological dependence can seem irrational from the outside, there are valid psychological mechanisms that underlie this phenomenon:

Classical Conditioning - Repeatedly taking a medication in the same contexts/situations can create conditioned associations with the effects it produces, leading to cravings
Cognitive Distortions - Fallacies like catastrophizing ("I won't be able to function without this") and dichotomous thinking can lead to beliefs of need

Confirmation Bias - Selectively attending to instances where the medication seemed helpful while ignoring non-events

Habit Formation -The routine of taking a medication can itself become an engrained habit that creates a craving when missed.

Expectations - Anticipating benefit or relief from a medication increases perceived need for it, potentially caused by placebo effects

These processes, combined with the genuine therapeutic effects of many medications in the first place, lay the groundwork for psychological dependence to develop over time. While belief in the ongoing need for the medication is core to this dependence, some individuals become preoccupied or even obsessive about obtaining and taking their medication as well.

4. MEDICATIONS PRONE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE :

Many classes of medications with mood-altering effects can cause psychological dependence:

Sleep medications - Users may become reliant on them to fall asleep

Stimulants - Can create a perceived need for increased energy/focus

Opioid pain relievers - Believed to be needed for any pain relief

Anti-anxiety medications - Associated with calmness and anxiety relief

Antidepressants - May be continued due to belief they are still needed

Even medications prescribed appropriately and at safe doses can lead to psychological dependence in some individuals based on their beliefs, experiences, and mental processes.

5. RISKS AND IMPACTS :

Psychological dependence on medication can have negative impacts including:

- Difficulty stopping a medication when it is no longer needed
- Escalating use beyond therapeutic doses
- Anxiety and preoccupation with obtaining and taking the medication
- Withdrawal effects from the psychological component when stopped

It is important for prescribers and patients to be aware of this potential dependence, use medications only as needed, and have a plan to gradually discontinue them when possible.

These various consequences underscore why psychological dependence should not be dismissed as a purely mental phenomenon. It can have real, tangible impacts on treatment outcomes and daily functioning.

6. CONCLUSION :

While the physical effects of medication dependence are clear, psychological dependence can be an underappreciated yet important phenomenon. Recognizing the potential for this mental aspect of perceived need for a substance is critical for safe and appropriate medication use. Interventions to address irrational beliefs around medication need should be part of treatment plans when applicable.

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