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SELF-ESTEEM IN PATIENTS WITH RHEUMATIC DISEASES: THE ROLE OF BODY-SELF UNITY

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Background: Maintaining positive self-esteem is one of the challenges for patients with chronic diseases. Limitations in physical functioning, often associated with having a rheumatic disease, can influence the perception of the body as belonging to the person (or as detached from the self) and might thereby finally affect the self-esteem of patients. The concept of body-self unity has been investigated in a phenomenological research tradition that works with qualitative methodology and small samples.

Objectives: To develop a questionnaire to measure body-self unity quantitatively and to investigate the predictive value of body-self unity for self-esteem in patients with rheumatic diseases.

Methods: The Body Experience Questionnaire was developed for the measurement of body-self unity. Besides this questionnaire, illness cognitions, pain intensity, functional limitations and self-esteem were measured via computers with touchscreen. 168 patients (mean age = 54,2 years, 62% female) with a rheumatic disease participated in this study consecutive visiting the rheumatology clinic. To analyse predictors of self-esteem, hierarchical regression analyses were employed (first step demographic characteristics, second step disease related variables (disease duration, functional limitations, pain), final step psychological constructs (body-self unity, illness cognitions)).

Results: The Body Experience Questionnaire revealed a two factor structure with good reliability (subscale harmony, Cronbachs alpha=.76; subscale alienation, Cronbachs alpha = 0.84). The final model of the hierarchical regression analyses showed that self-esteem can be predicted by helplessness, acceptance, harmony of body and self and most strongly by the alienation of body and self. R^2 of the final model was 0.50 (delta R for psychological variables in the final step was 0.28). The relation between functional limitations and self-esteem was fully mediated by the psychological constructs body self unity and illness cognitions.

Conclusion: This study showed the importance of psychological characteristics and particularly the experience of the body for self-esteem in patients with a rheumatic disease. Further research should explore therapies to increase the body-self unity.

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