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Stress Sensitivity in Psychosis

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Chapter Eight

Valorization

The global impact of mental illness on society and the lives of individuals has been greatly underestimated during the last decades1. Worldwide, lifetime prevalence rates for mental illness varies between 12% and 47%2. Although the lifetime prevalence for psychotic disorders are estimated at a much lower 2.3-3.5%3, its societal and personal impact are out of proportion. Individuals diagnosed with a psychotic disorder are often confronted with stigmatization, social isolation or exclusion, as well as increased chances of being unemployed, homeless, living in supportive home environments, and receiving long-term treatment. However, advances in treatment methods, as well as the shift in timing to earlier stages of illness development, seem promising. Research on risk factors and mechanisms is therefore vital in the understanding of the developmental course of psychosis, and ultimately to develop adequate early intervention strategies. The current thesis adds to this.

The work printed in this thesis describes scientific studies and reviews on stress reactivity in psychosis and other disorder-spectra. As such, it broadens our knowledge on the role of stress in the emergence of early psychotic symptoms. With regard to reactivity to stressful daily events, stronger affective responses were not necessarily associated with worse outcome. This highlights the notion that stress is, at its core, an adaptive, healthy process, and a greater stress response is not indicative for vulnerability. Hence, attenuation of this response should not be a target for treatment strategies, especially since an attenuated cortisol response is associated with psychosis, as was shown in this thesis. Only under circumstances where the response is disproportionally large, as in the case of minor hassles, or when the effects linger, can we speak about a dysfunctional response that may indicate a vulnerability to develop mental illness. Higher overall negative affect, indicative of the prolonged experience of stress, was the strongest daily-life predictor of the onset and persistence of symptoms indicative of psychopathology in adolescents and young adults. A possibility is that negative affect remains high after the occurrence of unpleasant events due to problems with recovery. Instead of focussing on the magnitude of the response, investigating the duration may provide a more valid, and therefore more accurate, estimate of the risk. Being able to optimize risk assessment is of crucial importance for early intervention

strategies, and this thesis, contributing to the understanding of disease development and progression, provides a piece of that puzzle.

Treatment of serious mental illness often involves medication or traditional cognitive behavioural therapy that targets specific symptoms. However, both approaches have their downsides, as medication has limited long-term effects with high chances of relapse upon discontinuation, and symptoms may change over time, or not represent the main source of distress (think about problems related to social and societal functioning). This thesis emphasizes the positive effects of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) or ACT-based treatment approaches for psychosis. The unspecific nature of ACT may be exceptionally well suited for clinical pictures in which sources of stress are not restricted to the symptomatology. In this thesis, the protocol of ACT in Daily Life is presented; an mHealth add-on to ACT in which individuals learn to cope with any given daily stressor. Ecological momentary interventions are well suited to bring the intervention in the individual's daily life. Random beeps force the user to take a minute to reflect on his or her current context, mood, and behaviour. Depending on the momentary situation, the user is provided with a tailored exercise or reminder of an adequate coping strategy. New developments in wearable technology offer the addition of continuous assessment of physiological measures, which can be used to detect sudden increases in arousal indicative for acute stress. Such treatment approaches may bring us one step closer to immediate intervention, at moments where it is needed most.

Ultimately, however, the goal is not to treat, but to prevent. As exposure to early-life stressors may sensitize stress reactivity in vulnerable individuals, early interventions are the only answer to timely interfere with the developing course of stress-related pathology. One possibility lies in school programs that are aimed at stress coping. A meta-analysis on interventions targeting stress management in primary and secondary schools shows large positive effects on stress symptoms and coping, although there was significant heterogeneity in study quality4.

Altogether, the work in this thesis has contributed to our understanding of the role of stress in the development of psychosis and other disorders, and has proposed new intervention and prevention avenues that promote mental health.

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