"Does hyperventilation work? A preliminary study on the effects of Holotropic Breathwork"

Iker Puente*, Santiago Estaún

* Basic, Evolutive and Educational Psychology Department


ikerpuente@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In the middle 70’s, after two decades working with LSD and other psychedelic substances in psychotherapy, Stanislav Grof developed the holotropic breathwork. This method was designed as a non-drug way of accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness or “holotropic states” (Grof, 2000). The holotropic breathwork involves a number of diverse elements, including music, elective bodywork and accelerated breathing. To date, few studies have examined empirically the therapeutic potential of this hyperventilation procedure (Binarow, 2010; Harraty, 2002; Holmes, 1996; Pressman, 1993).

The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of the Holotropic Breathwork, in combination with meditations, in the context of a weeklong workshop called “Insight and Opening”. This weeklong retreat combines four Holotropic Breathwork sessions, Vipassana meditation, and formal teachings.

METHODOLGY

Objectives: To analyze the effects of the Holotropic Breathwork (HB) in the context of the “Insight and Opening” week-long workshop. This study analyze:

1. The effects of HB in levels of distress, meaning of life, death anxiety and certain personality properties, measured with different psychometric test.
2. The type of experiences participants had during the HB sessions, using the Peak Experience Profile (PEP).

Participants: A total of 58 subjects, aged between 22 and 65 years. The subjects were recruited among the participants in the “Insight and Opening” workshop. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Both first breathes and participants with previous experience with HB were admitted. No control group was used in the present study.

Materials:

1. Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), a 53 item version of the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R). This test measure aspects of psychiatric and psychologic distress. The Global Severity Index (GSI) provides a measure of the global level of distress.
2. Purpose In Life Test (PIT): This test provides a measure of the extent to which an individual perceives life to be meaningful.
3. Death Anxiety Scale (DAS): This 15 item true-false scale measure fear of death and death anxiety.
4. Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI-140): This 140 item version of the TCI measure 7 dimensions of personality: 4 temperament dimensions (Novelty-seeking, Harm-avoidance, Reward Dependence and Persistence) and 3 dimensions of Character (Self-directedness, Cooperativeness and Self-transcendence).
5. Peak Experience Profile (PEP): This test is used to measure altered state of consciousness experiences: Internal Unity, External Unity; Transcendence of Time and Space; Ineffability and Paradoxicality; Sense of Sacredness; Noetic Quality; and Deeply-Felt Positive Mood.

Research Design: Cusi-experimental design. A repeated-measures, Pre-Post test design with a 4-month follow-up (Pre1): Four different measures were taken:

1) Pre-test: The first measure was taken the first day(s) of the workshop, before the first Holotropic Breathwork session.
2) During the retreat: a measure of the participants experience during the HB sessions was taken using the Peak Experience Profile (PEP).
3-4) Post-test: Two new measures were taken after the workshop: two week (Post1), and four months (Post2, follow-up) after the workshop.

RESULTS

The preliminary results of the study are presented, including:
1. A comparison between the scores of the participants in the first 2 measures: Pre-test and Post 1 (two weeks after the workshop);
2. The results of the Peak Experience Profile (PEP) for each of the Holotropic Breathwork sessions.

CONCLUSIONS

- The volunteers showed some significant changes on dependent measures when the Pre workshop and the Post1 measures are compared. The volunteers showed, two weeks after the workshop: 1) a significantly greater reduction in the Global Severity Index of the BSI; 2) a significantly greater increase in the total score of the Purpose In Life Test (PIT); 3) a reduction in the harm avoidance and significantly greater elevations in the self directedness dimension of the TCI-140.
- The Holotropic Breathwork can produce mystical type experiences in the context of the “Insight and Opening” workshop. According to the volunteer ratings on the Peak Experience Profile, two volunteers have a “complete” mystical or peak experience (9.5%) during their first HB session, and another two volunteers (10.5%) after their second HB session.
- Our future projects included: 1) To validate these results with a bigger sample. 2) To make another study with qualitative methodology and compare the results. 3) To develop similar studies in other contexts where Holotropic Breathwork and other hyperventilation procedures are used: week-long workshops, GTT training, individual psychotherapy.

References


Catalan and Spanish versions.
