PRESENTATION ABSTRACT

General Adaptation Syndrome and the Importance of Psycho-oncology

G.M. Sacco
Fordham University

Many people believe that the mind can cause physiological disturbances, thus increasing the occurrence of symptoms of a diagnosed medical condition or disease. In the case of cancer, the stress of a diagnosis itself can cause physical impairment and symptoms as a direct result of the initial reaction accompanied by a cancer diagnosis. Hans Seyle was able to conceptualize the biological disturbances the body undergoes when exposed to stress and called it “general adaptation syndrome.” He called the first stage the “alarm reaction,” which occurs when the body is first exposed to the stress therefore activating the autonomic nervous system. The “alarm reaction” can cause a decrease in the effectiveness of the immune system, which can be dangerous for a person diagnosed with cancer. The second stage of the general adaptation syndrome is referred to as the “stage of resistance,” during which the body attempts to cope with the stressor by changing. A person may feel tired and inactive which can be detrimental to the self-esteem and well-being of a newly diagnosed cancer patient. The third and most dangerous stage, “stage of exhaustion,” can cause serious biological disturbances as a result of a depleted immune system due to the body's failure to deal with the stress. The stress of being diagnosed with cancer can cause considerable effects on the body. With an understanding of Seyle's general adaptation syndrome, a psychologist can control the progression of stress at phase one or two by the use of various different psychotherapeutic techniques and effective coping mechanisms. This presentation will review how these psychotherapeutic techniques are used in a psycho-oncology setting.