

The role of psychoanalysis in the weight loss process: a psychological analysis of unconscious factors

O papel da psicanálise no processo de emagrecimento: uma análise psicológica de fatores inconscientes

El papel del psicoanálisis en el proceso de pérdida de peso: un análisis psicológico de los factores inconscientes

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RESUMO

Objetivo: explorar como a psicanálise pode contribuir para o processo de emagrecimento, enfatizando os fatores inconscientes que influenciam o comportamento alimentar. **Método:** revisão integrativa de estudos recentes (2020-2023) que investigam intervenções psicanalíticas aplicadas ao tratamento de sobrepeso e obesidade. Foram consultadas as bases de dados PubMed, Scielo e PsycINFO, utilizando descritores como "psicanálise", "emagrecimento", "compulsão alimentar" e "processos inconscientes". A análise incluiu 15 estudos que abordam intervenções clínicas e teóricas, investigando como os fatores inconscientes influenciam os comportamentos alimentares. **Resultados:** a psicanálise, quando utilizada isoladamente ou em combinação com terapias comportamentais, pode promover mudanças emocionais e comportamentais duradouras, auxiliando no controle de peso a longo prazo. Além disso, os pacientes tratados com psicanálise demonstraram maior propensão a reconhecer e modificar os padrões inconscientes que sustentam seus comportamentos alimentares. **Conclusão:** destacam-se desafios e oportunidades de integrar essas abordagens no tratamento da obesidade, sugerindo que mais investigações empíricas são necessárias para avaliar sua eficácia em diferentes contextos e perfis de pacientes.

Descritores: Psicanálise; Emagrecimento; Análise; Fatores inconscientes.

ABSTRACT

Objective: to explore how psychoanalysis can contribute to the weight loss process, emphasizing the unconscious factors that influence eating behavior. **Method:** this is an integrative review of recent studies (2020-2023) investigating psychoanalytic interventions applied to the treatment of overweight and obesity. Databases such as PubMed, Scielo, and PsycINFO were consulted, using descriptors like "psychoanalysis," "weight loss," "binge eating," and "unconscious processes." The analysis included 15 studies addressing clinical and theoretical interventions, examining how unconscious factors influence eating behaviors. **Results:** psychoanalysis, whether used alone or in combination with behavioral therapies, can promote lasting emotional and behavioral changes, aiding in long-term weight control. Furthermore, patients treated with psychoanalysis showed a greater tendency to recognize and modify the unconscious patterns that sustain their eating behaviors. **Conclusion:** we highlights the challenges and opportunities of integrating these approaches in obesity treatment, suggesting that more empirical investigations are needed to assess their effectiveness in different contexts and patient profiles.

Descriptors: Psychoanalysis; Weight Loss; Analysis; Unconscious Factors.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: explorar cómo el psicoanálisis puede contribuir al proceso de pérdida de peso, enfatizando los factores inconscientes que influyen en la conducta alimentaria. **Método:** revisión integradora de estudios recientes (2020-2023) que investigan intervenciones psicoanalíticas aplicadas al tratamiento del sobrepeso y la obesidad. Se consultaron las bases de datos PubMed, Scielo y PsycINFO, utilizando descriptores como "psicoanálisis", "pérdida de peso", "atracones" y "procesos inconscientes". El análisis incluyó 15 estudios que abordan intervenciones clínicas y teóricas, investigando cómo los factores inconscientes influyen en las conductas alimentarias. **Resultados:** El psicoanálisis, cuando se usa solo o en combinación con terapias conductuales, puede promover cambios emocionales y conductuales duraderos, ayudando en el control de peso a largo plazo. Además, los pacientes tratados con psicoanálisis demostraron una mayor propensión a reconocer y modificar los patrones inconscientes que subyacen a sus conductas alimentarias. **Conclusión:** se destacan los desafíos y oportunidades de la integración de estos enfoques en el tratamiento de la obesidad, lo que sugiere que se necesitan más investigaciones empíricas para evaluar su eficacia en diferentes contextos y perfiles de pacientes.

Descritores: Psicoanálisis; Adelgazante; Análisis; Factores inconscientes

Introduction

Obesity is a multifactorial condition that involves the complex interaction of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors, affecting millions of people around the world. Currently, it is considered one of the most critical public health issues due to its negative impact on the quality of life and physical, mental, and emotional conditions of individuals. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of overweight and obese people continues to grow alarmingly, requiring the implementation of more effective and comprehensive strategies for the control and treatment of the condition¹.

Traditional weight loss approaches, such as diets and exercise, often have limited long-term results. Although they are effective in the short term, many studies suggest that sustained weight loss success is intrinsically related to understanding the emotional and psychological factors that influence eating behavior². These interventions, however, frequently fail to address the underlying causes that perpetuate the cycle of weight gain, such as emotional conflicts and unconscious patterns of behavior.

Within psychology, eating behavior has been analyzed from several theoretical perspectives. Psychoanalysis offers a deep understanding of the unconscious motivations that may be related to being overweight. Developed by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis is a clinical and theoretical approach that aims to explore the unconscious contents that influence individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In the context of weight loss, psychoanalysis suggests that many dysfunctional eating behaviors are rooted in repressed emotional conflicts and the use of food as a means of relieving emotional tensions, such as anxiety, depression, or insecurity³.

Freud believed that many aspects of human behavior are grounded in unconscious desires and emotions that, when repressed, can manifest themselves in a variety of ways, including disordered eating patterns. Food, for many, assumes a symbolic role, often filling emotional gaps originating from past experiences or unmet needs⁴. Thus, the act of eating is not merely a biological response to hunger, but may be related to unconscious defense mechanisms, such as the replacement of painful emotions, feelings of emptiness, affective deficiencies, and frustrations⁵.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and weight loss, therefore, goes beyond simple calorie control and increased physical activity. Psychoanalysis focuses on understanding and treating the emotional roots that shape the individual's relationship with food and their own body. The unconscious may lead patients to adopt self-destructive eating behaviors, such as binge eating, or to maintain a symbolic attachment to excess weight as a form of protection against the external world or expression of unresolved emotional conflicts. Thus, the weight loss process from a psychoanalytic perspective involves the analysis of unconscious content and the resignification of dysfunctional behaviors.

Psychoanalysis also explains the failure of many traditional weight loss treatments. Interventions focused only on behavioral changes, such as diet and exercise, often do not address the underlying factors that maintain maladaptive eating patterns. Studies indicate that success in weight loss may be linked to a deeper understanding of the emotional and unconscious dynamics that

interfere with eating behavior. Psychoanalytic treatment, by bringing to light these repressed contents, allows the patient a new understanding of himself, promoting a lasting transformation in eating habits ².

Many overweight or obese individuals report a complex emotional relationship with food, where the act of eating becomes a way of coping with feelings that they cannot consciously process. Psychoanalysis allows these individuals to recognize the role that food plays beyond physical nutrition, helping them to unravel the true nature of their eating behaviors. For example, binge eating can be seen to "fill" a deep emotional void, often associated with trauma or unresolved losses ⁶. These unresolved feelings are explored in analysis sessions, allowing the patient to face the emotional causes of their compulsion and find healthier ways to cope with their emotions.

In addition, psychoanalysis does not only focus on eating behavior, but also on the individual's perception and relationship with their own body. The body is often seen as an "object" of suffering or pleasure, and weight-related issues may be associated with emotional conflicts about self-image and self-worth ⁵. Body weight can become a symbol of deeper problems, such as shame, guilt, or fear of rejection. Psychoanalytic therapy helps the patient to explore and restructure these feelings, leading to a new relationship with the body and facilitating the weight loss process.

In this sense, weight loss transcends the simple loss of physical weight; It involves an emotional and psychological transformation. By addressing the emotional and unconscious aspects of obesity, psychoanalysis provides lasting and significant changes that affect both eating behavior and self-esteem, body perception, and the individual's relationship with their emotions.

Therefore, this article seeks to explore how psychoanalysis can be an effective tool in the treatment of overweight and obesity. By combining the knowledge of depth psychology with clinical practice aimed at weight loss, psychoanalysis offers a comprehensive approach, which aims not only at weight loss, but also at emotional healing and the promotion of broader well-being. By understanding the unconscious motivations and emotional conflicts that underpin maladaptive eating patterns, patients can achieve sustainable changes in their lives and in their physical and mental health.

In this sense, the objective of this study was to investigate how psychoanalysis can help in the weight loss process, analyzing the relationship between unconscious factors and eating behavior. It seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of psychoanalysis in promoting lasting changes in the patient's relationship with food and body, based on the review of recent studies.

Methodology

The research used an integrative literature review approach, with the objective of gathering and analyzing studies that investigate the application of psychoanalysis in the weight loss process. This methodology allows a critical and comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature, providing a holistic view of the current state of scientific evidence in relation to psychoanalysis and its clinical interventions aimed at weight loss and obesity treatment.

Data sources and descriptors

The PubMed, Scielo and PsycINFO databases were consulted, widely recognized for providing access to high-quality scientific articles in the areas of health, psychology and social sciences. The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2023, ensuring the inclusion of recent and updated studies on the topic.

The following descriptors were used for the search: "psychoanalysis," "weight loss," "binge eating," "obesity," "unconscious processes." These terms were selected to ensure the inclusion of studies that investigated the impact of psychoanalysis on the treatment of overweight and obesity, as well as its role in modifying eating behaviors related to emotional and unconscious factors.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies, the following inclusion criteria were established:

- Studies that addressed clinical interventions based on psychoanalysis applied to the treatment of overweight or obese patients.
- Empirical articles and theoretical reviews that analyzed the relationship between unconscious processes and maladaptive eating behaviors, such as binge eating.
- Studies evaluating the effectiveness of psychoanalysis in weight control and in the modification of eating patterns in the long term.
- Articles published in English, Portuguese or Spanish.

Studies that focused exclusively on behavioral interventions, such as cognitive therapies or weight loss programs, without the integration of psychoanalytic elements, studies with insufficient samples or methodologically fragile, or articles that did not present clinical results or focused only on theoretical approaches without empirical evaluation were excluded.

Data analysis and synthesis

After the identification and selection of the articles, a qualitative analysis of the content of the studies was carried out, focusing on:

1. **Intervention method used:** the applied psychoanalytic approaches, such as transference analysis, dream interpretation, or analysis of unconscious conflicts related to eating behavior.
2. **Results obtained:** evaluation of the effects of the interventions on eating behavior, weight control and the emotional relationship of patients with food and body.
3. **Limitations of the studies:** sample size, lack of long-term follow-up, and possible biases in the results.

The focus was to investigate how psychoanalysis contributes to the modification of the emotional and behavioral patterns that sustain obesity and binge eating. Studies that compared the effectiveness of psychoanalysis with

other therapeutic approaches, such as diets and physical exercise programs, were included.

Results

The review of the studies revealed that psychoanalysis has a significant impact on the weight loss process, especially when addressing emotional and unconscious issues that directly influence eating behavior. The central role of psychoanalysis in the treatment of overweight and obesity is to reveal unconscious defense mechanisms, such as the repression of emotions and the use of food to deal with frustrations and unresolved anxieties.²

Impact on binge eating

Lacroix et al.² conducted a study with patients who had binge eating episodes and observed a significant reduction in these episodes after psychoanalytic intervention. The patients demonstrated a deeper understanding of their emotional impulses related to food, which allowed them to identify the times when they used food as a defense mechanism. This resulted in a change in eating behavior, with greater control over binge episodes and a more balanced relationship with food.

The reviewed studies suggest that psychoanalysis, alone or in combination with behavioral approaches, plays a significant role in the treatment of overweight or obese patients. By addressing unconscious factors that shape eating behaviors, psychoanalysis offers a profound emotional and behavioral transformation, helping patients develop a new relationship with food and the body.

Long-term success

Rinaldi and Silva⁵ investigated the efficacy of psychoanalysis in long-term weight loss. The study compared patients treated with psychoanalytic interventions with those who participated exclusively in behavioral interventions, such as diets and physical exercise programs. The results indicated that patients treated with psychoanalysis were more successful in maintaining weight loss over time, showing a lower propensity to regain it after the end of the interventions.

Psychoanalysis helped these patients identify the emotional conflicts that led them to binge eat, such as feelings of emptiness, insecurity, and negative self-image. These conflicts, once brought to consciousness and worked on in analysis sessions, allowed patients to modify their emotional responses to food impulses, adopting healthier and more conscious behaviors.

Combined intervention: psychoanalysis and behavioral therapies

Santos et al.⁶ analyzed the effectiveness of combining psychoanalysis with behavioral therapies in the treatment of obesity. Research has shown that the blended approach offers a more holistic and effective intervention by working on both the conscious and unconscious aspects of eating behavior.

Psychoanalysis provided patients with deep emotional understanding, while behavioral therapies offered practical tools to modify these behaviors.

The results indicated that patients undergoing the hybrid intervention were able to create eating habits with greater adherence. The combination of psychoanalytic techniques with behavior modification strategies accelerated the process of change, offering complete support for the patient to deal with emotional and social pressures that influence their weight. In addition, patients demonstrated a greater ability to recognize and deal with emotional triggers that previously led to uncontrolled eating, such as moments of stress or loneliness. This deep understanding, combined with behavioral practices, resulted in a sustained improvement, not only in weight loss, but also in the relationship with the body and with food.

The reviewed studies suggest that psychoanalysis, alone or in combination with behavioral approaches, plays a significant role in the treatment of overweight or obese patients. By addressing unconscious factors that shape eating behaviors, psychoanalysis offers a profound emotional and behavioral transformation, helping patients develop a new relationship with food and the body.

Discussion

The effectiveness of psychoanalysis in the treatment of overweight and obesity is based on its differentiated approach, which seeks to access and modify unconscious processes responsible for shaping eating behavior. Many patients who face weight control difficulties use food to regulate repressed emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, guilt, or feelings of inadequacy². These eating patterns are often constructed in response to traumatic events or unmet emotional needs, which remain hidden in the unconscious.

The main contribution of psychoanalysis to weight loss lies in its ability to bring out these repressed emotions and their underlying meanings. By recognizing and understanding the emotional and unconscious factors that lead to dysfunctional food use, the patient can reformulate their relationship with food and the body, promoting lasting and profound changes. This differs from approaches that focus only on symptoms, such as diet and exercise, in that psychoanalysis treats the underlying emotional and psychological causes⁵.

Psychoanalysis as a long-term treatment

Psychoanalysis is particularly useful in the long-term treatment of obesity, as it provides a continuous space for the patient to gradually work through their emotions and unresolved conflicts. In this way, it provides lasting changes in eating and behavioral patterns. However, this approach requires dedication and time on the part of the patient. This may be a limitation for individuals seeking quick solutions to weight loss, and behavioral or pharmacological approaches, which offer immediate results, may be preferred by these patients⁶.

Combination of psychoanalytic and behavioral approaches

A promising trend in the treatment of obesity is the combination of psychoanalytic and behavioral approaches. Recent studies, such as the one by Santos et al.⁶, highlight that hybrid interventions, which integrate behavior modification with emotional and unconscious exploration, promote faster and more sustainable changes. This combination offers a more comprehensive solution, as it acts on both the conscious and unconscious levels of eating behavior. While behavioral techniques help to modify habits, psychoanalysis allows the patient to understand and control the emotions that often sabotage these changes. This integrated approach offers emotional and practical support to cope with the emotional and social pressures that affect the environment.o.

Limitations and need for further studies

Although the combination of approaches is promising, further studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions in different patient profiles. Most of the reviewed studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of psychoanalysis in patients who use food to cope with emotional conflict, but it is unclear whether all overweight or obese individuals respond in a similar way. The diversity of factors that contribute to obesity, such as genetics, metabolic aspects, and social factors, suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be sufficient for all patients.

Thus, future research should explore which patient profiles may benefit most from psychoanalysis, alone or in combination with other interventions. In addition, the ideal duration of treatment and its effectiveness in different phases of weight loss should be investigated, also considering the impact of external factors, such as social support and environment.

Conclusion

This study showed that psychoanalysis can be an effective tool in the treatment of overweight and obese patients, by focusing on the unconscious factors that influence eating behavior. By exploring the emotional mechanisms and repressed conflicts that shape patients' relationship with food and body, psychoanalysis promotes a profound emotional transformation that goes beyond weight loss. This process allows patients to understand their unconscious motivations, resignify their emotions, and establish a new relationship with the act of eating.

Psychoanalysis treats the underlying causes of binge eating, such as unresolved trauma and emotional conflicts. Despite the promising results, more robust empirical research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness in different contexts and populations, considering the diversity of factors that influence overweight and obesity.

In addition, the combination of psychoanalytic techniques with behavioral interventions is a promising approach, which can accelerate the process of change and offer emotional and practical support for the modification of eating habits. Future studies should explore this combination to optimize therapeutic strategies in the fight against obesity.

Thus, psychoanalysis, as part of a multidimensional approach, has the potential to be a powerful intervention to promote sustainable weight loss and improve the quality of life of patients, by offering not only weight loss, but a profound transformation in their emotional and mental health.

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