Author's response to reviews

Title: Prevalence and course of somatic symptoms in patients with stress-related exhaustion. Does sex or age matter?

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RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS AND EDITOR

We greatly appreciate the reviewer valuable comment on our manuscript and the opportunity of revising the manuscript.

All changes in the manuscript are highlighted in red.

Reviewer 1:

This is a small study taking use of an exhaustion intervention to study also the course of somatic symptoms among the participants. The reason for this is justified and interesting: It makes it possible to study whether the somatic symptoms are stress-related, i.e., also get relieved in the intervention. However, the intervention design (limited number of participants) is not quite optimal for studying the course of the symptoms in several subgroups.

It seems that we have been unclear in explaining the study design and the aim of the study. Most importantly this is not an intervention study. The study is a registry study, were patient register has been explored with regard to somatic symptoms. Thus, the prevalence and the course of symptoms during a period of 18 months was followed in patients that fulfilled the criteria for Exhaustion Disorder. During this time the patients were offered treatment at a specialist clinic but the study is not designed as a traditional intervention study with an intervention group and a control group. All patients were offered similar treatment during this period. The main question was to explore the prevalence of different somatic symptom in these patients and follow the course of these symptoms during the period that the patients are being treated for exhaustion. The second question was to explore if men and women with exhaustion show different pattern with regard to somatic symptoms as it has in several studies been shown that women report more symptoms and more commonly seek health care for different symptoms. We wanted to explore if this is the case even in this population. Also comparison between young and old patients is of interest as it could perhaps be expected that young patients would show different pattern with less number of somatic symptoms. We have now thoroughly read though the paper and changed the text accordingly to make this clearer.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. In the introduction, the terms used should be clarified. Exhaustion, fatigue, and burnout are not mental disorders like depression and anxiety.

This is correct and we have no changed this.

2. The subgroup analyses by sex and age should be better justified, either by theoretical or practical reasons.

The main aim of the study was to explore somatic symptoms in a clinical population of patients with burnout/exhaustion. We are generally interested in comparing men and women in our research as this area is sex differentiated with more women seeking help for mental and somatic symptoms related to
stress. We have previously found that in female and male patients with Exhaustion report similar burden of mental symptoms and we wanted to know if this was the case even for somatic symptoms. The comparison between younger and older patients is explorative but our hypothesis was that younger patients might report less burden of symptoms. Very little research has been conducted on burnout, somatic symptoms and plausible impact on age. We have now hopefully clarified this better in the manuscript.

3. The grounds for the study are bit vague and lack theoretical reasoning. Somatic symptoms and illness may predispose to mental health problems, mental health problems may lead to somatic illness, or stress may manifest as both mental and somatic symptoms. These options could be laid out and introduced more clearly.

As far as we know, no previous study has explored the pattern of somatic symptoms in a clinical group of patients seeking for stress-related exhaustion and followed the course of symptoms during such a long period of time. As the reviewer rightfully pointed out, stress is manifested as both mental and somatic symptoms. For the patients included in this study, the major manifestation is mental exhaustion and the knowledge with regard to the somatic symptoms in this group is very little. It is important to focus even on these symptoms in order for the clinicians to know, both the pattern, but also if the symptoms mainly are stress-related. Thus, when the stress-related exhaustion is treated, the somatic symptoms will also decline, and this seem to be the case for almost all of the symptoms reported in this study. We have change the introduction considerably, hopefully being clearer with regard to the grounds for this study.

4. In my opinion, all relevant literature has not been cited in the introduction, regarding especially population-based studies and somatic disorders related to burnout/exhaustion. Such is, for example, Honkonen et al. 2006 (J Psychosom Res). In Finland, many studies on burnout have been made using population-based samples (by Ahola et al.). No sex differences in burnout was found and burnout was more common among older than among younger workers.

Thank you for pointing this out. We are well aware of the fine work that this Finnish group is conducting and we use many of the articles in our research on burnout. Honkonen et al is obviously of great relevance for this paper, and has now been added. Ahola et al is also relevant to add when stating that in most studies (at least in Sweden), the prevalence of burnout is commonly found to be higher in women than men. Other studies from this group are of interested to use as references in many of our studies, particularly in our studies on working population.

5. The authors do not seem to have knowledge on all national practices to define burnout. At least in the Netherlands, there are clinical criteria to define burnout. See for example, Schaufeli et al. 2001 (Psychology & Health), Brenninkmeyer & van Yperen 2003 (OEM), Roelofs et al. 2005 (Stress and Health).

This is an interesting point and yes we do know of most of the different definition of burnout, particularly in Holland. We have added a sentence on the clinical burnout definition in the Netherlands as this is of relevance to mention.

6. Please give evidence-based justification for the cut-point of 6 symptoms for somatic symptoms.

Information and reference on why this cut-off was chosen is now included in the methods.
7. The number of participants is adequate to an intervention study but quite small to a study examining symptoms in several subgroups. This should be mentioned as a limitation of the study.

As previously mentioned, we must have been unclear when describing the study as this is not an intervention study. Hopefully this has now been better clarified in the text and we have also added this information in limitation.

8. Common method variance regarding the measurement of exhaustion and the symptoms should also be discussed as a limitation of the study.

A sentence regarding this has now been included in the discussion.

Minor revisions:

9. The title should include a mention “during treatment” or something like that.

As the study is not an intervention study, we would prefer to omit the word treatment from the title.

10. Instead, I am not sure if the “does sex and age matter” is necessary in the title. It is not the main aim of the study.

As this is the only group comparisons made in the study and in our opinion an important one, we would prefer to keep this information in the title. Hopefully the rationale of the study is no clearer written.

11. The reference Blair et al. 2003 at page 14 should be represented as numbered like other references.

This has now been done.

12. The subtitle “somatic symptoms and mental illness” should be changes to something related to the topic of the study, like exhaustion.

The title has now been changed.

13. Figure 1 is missing.

There much have been some problems with the submission. Hopefully figure 1 is now included in the submission.

Needs some language corrections before being published

The manuscript was edited by an English editor before submission. Additional minor correction has now been done, hopefully further improving the paper.