Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Kirsi Ahola

Reviewer's report:

Review of the manuscript "Prevalence and course of somatic symptoms in patients with stress-related exhaustion. Does sex or age matter?" submitted to BMC Psychiatry

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.

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

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).

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

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

Minor revisions:
9. The title should include a mention “during treatment” or something like that.
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.
11. The reference Blair et al. 2003 at page 14 should be represented as numbered like other references.
12. The subtitle “somatic symptoms and mental illness” should be changes to something related to the topic of the study, like exhaustion.
13. Figure 1 is missing.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.