

Original Paper

Holistic Approaches to Schizophrenic Nightmares

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It is widely known that schizophrenia is caused by stressful events in life. This is visible in the general understanding of the condition as in such widely known phrases like being driven round the bend and round the twist. That stress creates a conscious overload which can cause nightmares and hallucinations. Once these initial stresses have caused the schizophrenia the stress of having the illness perpetuates the cause of the problem. To prevent this, it is necessary to find ways of stopping the subconscious overload which can be aided by having a holistic approach to doing this. This is described in this article.

When in a dream it feels like you are really there and this can be terrifying, like the schizophrenia, for example I dreamed I was being crucified which is what the highest levels of fear with the schizophrenia is like. Nightmares were a bit of a euphemism for what I was experiencing. I call this phenomenon schizophrenic nightmares. Something had to be done but what?

The overload causes nightmares and hallucinations in the subconscious mind. What is needed are ways of stopping the subconscious overload. As we shall see there are various ways of doing this and making life less overwhelming. We need to tackle things head on instead of storing things up in the subconscious.

To do this we need to distance ourselves from the stress, fears and emotional pain which we cannot cope with. Much of this is common to schizophrenia which is very frightening and stressful. In my case there was also a lot of emotional pain thinking I had caused 9/11 and had killed all those people.

Voices as well as delusions can also cause the overload. Again what is being heard is frightening and stressful. In my case the voices were talking about 9/11 and were saying I was going to be punished in some indescribable way. What they were talking about were my subconscious thinking.

I had to learn ways to live with the voice and get along with them when hearing things: I thought to myself other people were responsible for terrible things in history. So with the Maslow tree I recovered

some self-esteem and calmed down so far as the voices were in some agreement about this.

The answer to the subconscious overload was to take things gradually. Some graded exposure and things like developing insight were both helpful here. Thus it was possible to stop the overload and confront things head. The graded exposure was useful.

All the same it was difficult to admit to myself that these subconscious doubts were there. I always averted my gaze from doing this. All this takes some strength but as many things improve gradually with the illness the more opportunities for this will increase.

Stopping the overload will stop the nightmares and will allow for some restorative sleep. You will get up in the morning refreshed. Then without the nightmares the psychoses will not be the first thing on your mind. This will then give an opportunity to get pulled round and face the day. Yet at some point the fear will inevitably return and needs dealing with.

So, the problem with daily living is that you know at some point the voices and delusions will return. This creates a constant state of anxiety. Finding ways of keeping busy can help here. The anxiety is also more easy to overcome with courage, though again this takes admitting to yourself the anxiety is really happening.

Without this even the anxiety will continue. If it is not checked it can become a serious mental health problem on its own and even at this level is hard to keep distracted from it. You cannot just snap out of it and strategies for daily living are necessary to understand and combat it.

Part of life will pick up again in between having the psychotic thoughts. You can start to enjoy things so that it is not constant emotional pain causing the overload. Some examples can illustrate this. One is that the highlight of the year is going on holiday and gives you something to look forward to even when at home.

Another is that we must realise how lucky we are to have the financial freedom of controlling our benefits. This can be very empowering and allows for many soothing activities like living comfortably well and doing things that lets you enjoy the material side of life. All of this is soothing and along with the pleasure is an important coping strategy.

Compassion Focused therapy works along these lines and will stop the overload too. So, as in this account should eliminate some of the psychotic thoughts. The problem is that never psychology prevents being compassionate and so some other solution is necessary. What follows is an account of how this might be

possible using a step by step process which is effective in dealing with the illness and the subconscious.

Thinking of potential solutions to the overload is itself a distraction. It can absorb all of my thinking and the hope is something might turn up. It is very interesting how the mind works and what thought processes can help with schizophrenia. This like reading an academic subject can be very engrossing.

This analysis stops the thoughts coming into view in the front of my mind and allows them to be safely stored up in the subconscious while I am doing the thinking. Again this can be reassuring as it allows some time to think of a solution. So, it also has a calming effect.

Only at certain points sometimes, when I remember about them, the delusional thoughts come into view. This also sets off the voices talking about them: The two symptoms need dealing with as together they make things worse. Voices are frightening enough on their own but alongside delusions things are twice as bad.

Thinking you are going to be punished for 9/11 is frightening enough. Nothing could be worse or so it seems. Yet having voices at the same time adds to even this level of fear. The upper limit in the experience of both together can be combined into a singular overwhelming experience which might psychiatrist described as 'particular severe.'

One answer is to talk back to the voices and persuade them to go away Yet when your caught up with a delusion at the same time this is more difficult and you get preoccupied by both. Like a voices that won't shut up you cannot get these delusional thoughts out of you head. It is difficult to concentrate on anything else as hearing voices will prevent this. So all you can think about is the paranoia. The distraction may only be possible at the less terrifying levels of the illness.

It may seem possible to do this when you hear the voices on their own. This rarely happens with me as it is the delusions which bring the voices on. Then you are so caught up with the fear and what you are thinking that doing anything about the voices is really difficult.

The problem with the overload is that once you see what you are thinking this sets off the overload again. It is necessary to find ways of looking at the thoughts without being too frightened of what they are about. Here the emotional pain they cause is just as frightening because of what all this means for you as a person and as a human being.

Coming to terms with you can be difficult enough and it takes courage to really see yourself. Yet under the terms of being delusional about 9/11 this problem is much worse. Some insight is required for looking

at yourself and the delusion together.

Finally, this antidote of looking at yourself causes further problems as self-actualisation require us to connect with the inner core. That might be difficult as climbing the Maslow tree to this level can be prevented with all the fear involved.

The emotional pain of thinking you have killed all those people in 9/11 is made worse by the voices criticising you for it. That makes it harder to engage emotionally and stops any progression to the self-esteem level of the Maslow tree. Furthermore, combatting the feelings of responsibility of something like 9/11 makes it very difficult to emphasize your good points in the face of this.

Again this makes things at the self-actualising level equally difficult as it seems possible that you are capable of perpetrating something like that. Then this must reflect on who you are. Having an identity and sense of self which might contradict this tends to take second place in the context of the delusion. You are stuck with feeling shame for who you are.

The answer to the emotional pain, damaged self-esteem and soiled sense of sense are added to by the stigma. This reinforces all these feeling. It needs are proper explanation that the labels applied are coined out of ignorance and are just misdescriptions.

What is also needed is to have insight during the acute phases. Yet the amygdala will be clicked back so far that looking at yourself and these beliefs logically and emotionally is going to be very difficult. Some professional help form a cognitive behavioural therapist might be needed here.

Gradually the periods of suffering should get less and less as the stress reduces and the better life will get. It is not all doom and gloom. Eventually having insight through cognitive training will begin to stand some chance and the fear should gradually be reduced.

With the other methods used here the cognitive approach must be applied at the same time. This is especially needed during the crisis phases so that you are self-aware enough to be able to question the voices and delusions. Then you can talk back to them.

Being able to confront the thoughts with the insight should will allow us reopen all those frontal lobe. This can help with life emotionally, intellectually, creatively and personality all of which are also therapeutic. Using these faculties will take our mind off the anxiety.

The graded exposure takes some time maybe years. There will still be crisis episodes. So, you have to hang in there until they pass. You can tell yourself that these things will get less frequent and prolonged.

Many things will make you happy with life along the way. Making new friends which will make life enjoyable but also help with the self-esteem. Again this soothing will stimulate the frontal lobes and in time will allow for more opportunities to take advantage of them.

As your appetite returns you can begin to enjoy the everyday things in life again like cooking and eating a meal. Again this helps climb the Maslow tree and not feeling hungry all the time will act as a source of strength and eating will give you an immediate lift. This allows for opening up the possibility of dealing with primary needs and from there to confronting the over loading fear at Maslow's level two.

Not overcoming level one needs is another aspect of stress that can cause an overloaded mind. Yet meeting these should be possible from time to time when the symptoms fear wear off. This then allows us to start dealing with Maslow's safety needs. Getting to level two is essential to combatting the fear with schizophrenia as it causes another aspect of the overload.

In between meals however the anxiety returns so you don't feel hungry. Then taking your mind off things is difficult as the delusion is always there at the back of your mind. You can try to divert your attention by multitasking with it and keeping busy. This is difficult because what you are responsible for is so serious.

You can still look after yourself when being delusional and anxious. This especially if you tell yourself that you can overcome the problem. So you will have more strength to satisfy things at level one. This will create a space where you can build strength further again as with anxiety you can think of the two things at once.

This helps you do things like cookery but also housework and exercise. It allows you to live as normal a life as possible and as with normal life all the same motivations apply. One thing is not to let the anxiety ruin your life. Here treating yourself to something is good for you is a way of tackling low mood.

One thing that helps stop the subconscious overload is being able to leave the house. In my case this gets me away from the neighbours spying on you about 9/11. Not being indoors all the time will stop the mind focusing on the delusions. Being inside the house concentrates the mind on the voices.

Hiding away from the neighbours and keeping the blinds drawn stops them from seeing you. So, even if they are watching they will not be able to gather information about you and pass it on to the CIA. You can adapt to having the blinds drawn all the time. This will calm you down.

This should mean that your house is a safe place where you can get away from the paranoia. Safe place

imagery is essential to approaches like compassion focused therapy. When living indoors in your safe place this can help with the most acute phases as you are inside an environment that will have a calming influence on you.

The one caveat here is that if you persistently ill in the place where you are living you will associate your own home with the suffering involved. This has a lot to do with emotional memories. So, when I go past other places that I was living in when ill the sight of it brought it all back.

The answer to this was to get out to confront the fear by being around the people I was paranoid about. This confronts the symptoms more directly. Having someone to come with me I was able to overcome the fear with a mixture of support and courage. After that I could go home and overcome the same fear. So, my home began to feel safe again.

There was a twist here in my story with the illness. I used to hear the neighbours banging on the walls every time I was thinking about 9/11. I thought they were reacting to my culpability for it. That meant they were still passing on information and 9/11 and were persecuting me for it first by trying to play on my nerves.

Fortunately, these symptoms passed after a while. Yet they were still capable of causing some fear when the memory of it periodically came to mind indoors. Remembering this only happened occasionally as my mind was often preoccupied and distracted by other thoughts.

What turns a house into a home involves a lot of factors. This can be difficult when you first move in. Often after having a period in hospital you will have to move in somewhere new and life has to start again. Moving house is one of the most stressful things you can do and may exacerbate the psychoses.

The lack of familiar surroundings meant there is less therapy available to cushion the blows that the paranoia about the neighbours can inflict. Some therapy is needed if living somewhere new so the place is going to have a homely feeling. The combined stress of both can have you back in hospital again with an overloaded subconscious.

So how is changing the feel of the place to be done? Getting your personal belongings into the new place will give it some continuity with your personal history. This allows for some recognition that where you are living is yours and is a part of you. That sense of belonging is an important therapy.

The second key factor is to rely on your friends and family coming round. This will take more than a house warming and over time you will associate the place with happy memories. These will deepen over

time. You will get to like the place and enjoy living there.

Again the success of all this depends on being lucky with the psychosis. It means not having such frequent episodes. So, your senses get a chance to focus on your surrounding environment. Overtime being in your own space will allow you to deal with the psychoses better. This might keep you out of hospital.

Again this aspect of enjoying life should be therapeutic. You can turn what is initially an empty house into a place to live life to the full. This will then be a platform to do other therapeutic things. Many people like being at home and this should be the goal for service users.

This all has a knock-on effect on getting out and about as it provides a safety net in case anything goes wrong. Then walking and shopping in the local area becomes possible as there is somewhere safe to run back to.

So, this allows some reassurance for getting out and about. Then it is not such a mental obstacle for doing this as sometimes the thought of going out itself becomes a psychological barrier. Once we practice exposure to people outside we are more able to confront the paranoia at home. This together with the advantages which having a homely place which can help with this.

Yet getting out and about can cause similar problems. Having being ill somewhere associates that place with the illness and stops you going back. The memory of it is frightening and triggers off the paranoia. Yet overcoming the fear stops this reaction and there is a chance to associate the place with something more positive.

Getting out and about is pleasurable and relaxing. It can cause happy memories which will gradually reduce the feelings of paranoia associated with a particular place. This is reassuring and can help control the fear. It leaves you in a good mood producing a feeling of increased safety for going back home.

The problem is that we keep remembering the memory which can trigger off the psychoses. Yet with this enjoying life allows the mind to remember positive thoughts. So, it doesn't drift back into thinking about the paranoia. We are more likely to remember positive things than negative ones.

The more we remember the good times during phases of anxiety which can be depressing the more distraction is possible. Again we are replacing something painful with something pleasurable. This means we are not completely focused on the pain as pleasure can counteract this.

As you begin to calm down your emotions will return. That should allow for family relations including

nieces and nephews which should again be therapeutic and strengthening. This especially through special occasions including family occasions like Christmas and birthdays.

Your family can then offer you emotional support so the experience of schizophrenia is less depressing. Being loved is very soothing and allows someone you trust to offload your problems. This provided you are not paranoid about your relatives.

Talking things through and sharing life problems is normal to coping with life and everyone needs a hand to hold on to. Support can come from family, friends and partners and having a chat about life can be very soothing.

Talking it through will involve explaining how stressful things are and how bad you feel about yourself according to whatever the voices are criticising you for. As with being hurt by life this can all be soothed by having a chat about it with someone who cares about you.

Without family trust there will be less ways to reduce the stress. So, the illness can leave you completely emotionally isolated and without that life is going to be much more stressful. This with or without the schizophrenia.

Sometimes this can also happen with stigma as people are dumped by friends and family. This is going to be a tremendous loss. It can be answered only so far if you meet a partner within the confines of the mental health system.

Much depends on what you are experiencing as being responsible for 9/11 will not just seem to be a delusion. So, there is no way talking about it is going to help. Yet it is possible for people with schizophrenia to share their experiences which can also be therapeutic.

Yet talking it through can mean you not the only person in the world to have done such things, take Hitler and Stalin for example. So some conversation should be possible. My Community Psychiatric Nurse tried this with me about being responsible for 9/11. He made the point that from the other perspective of Al Quaeda it was a good thing.

That only worked so far emotionally as I believed I had killed all those people. So, even if it was in the name of a political cause I couldn't justify it. The emotional pain was often too much to allow engaging with positive emotions and the fear of being punished was still there.

Often the stress of ordinary living people can be a profound emotional experience and allows us to see

how hard life can be. It makes us real people and we can experience some personal growth with it. This might be useful for climbing the Maslow tree. We can develop a philosophical attitude to life like this and take responsibility for the illness. It will then help with the mood problems it can cause.

This can be another positive in life with the illness provided the stress is not too severe. Again allows for some emotional strength. The more we grow the stronger we will be and the more capable we are of confronting the challenges that both life and the illness can throw at us.

Much of the time the illness manifest as a constant of anxiety. If unchecked this doesn't allow for much chance to rest. Yet as we grow in strength the stressful effects of the intermediate levels of symptoms, which manifest as fear, can in turn be challenged.

Many things can be frightening and we need to have the courage to overcome this reaction. This in the face of the dangers confronting us. If we confront the dangers head on that alone will develop a source of strength though it is more likely that graded exposure will have to be used.

If you can see it as a challenge that will reduce much of the stress associated with schizophrenia. You can see it as a learning curve. Stress is good for you if you can handle it. Then if you can deal with schizophrenia at moderate levels of fear there will not be a lot in life that you won't be able to deal with.

Another thing involved with feeling frightened is because of the stigma. This can place you in danger from anyone who finds out about you. However, you might be able overcome this sort of fear too with practice in dealing with the schizophrenia. This again allows for developing a more normal emotional state.

It is a terrible thing to think you are cut off from the society as for instance being excluded by people for causing 9/11. This as well as being stigmatised with the illness which constitutes another set of dangers. The stigma again causes another overload but life at day centres can make up for this and can be emotionally engaging.

Having partners can help with a world that treats you cruelly and is emotionally hard. Again it is important to view this as just an ordinary part of life. So although this is stigma it is no different from more normal experiences. Having emotional support is vital to dealing with the stigma. That prompts the reaction as in a song by Dire Straits "just when this world seems mean and cold, our love comes shining red and gold."

Being criticised by other people likewise is a normal part of life. This means we can develop a negative

self-image in the same way we can be criticised by hearing voices. Having reassurances from friends and family can help us stand up to the voice and say things in our self-defence. This can allow us to confront the voices and reduces stress.

As the psychotic episodes diminish in frequency we can begin to learn to relax. This can be helped by aromatherapy oils, deep breathing, safe place imagery and homeopathic remedies. Some Valium can help with the fear part of the overload but is often not prescribed.

Then once we begin to calm down we can meditate on the subconscious problems. Then we can begin to admit to ourselves that they are really there and from here we can question with insight. This to see if there is any cognitive behavioural therapy that might help.

Meditating on the subconscious can also be combined with meditating on the inner core. So we can ask whether we are really capable as a human being of causing 9/11. It was really possible you could have perpetrated such an atrocity. This in turn lead to thoughts which might also help with your self-esteem.

The problem with the subconscious overload is to try and remember the core during the worst psychotic phases. So, to use this to see if it will generate a source of insight. At the worst points though you will also need to stand up to the voices at these times. It might also help to practice some distraction.

Distraction is another way of stopping the overload. Sometimes this is easier said than done. Yet focusing on our inner core can be distracting and allows for looking at the subconscious in connection with it. This is much more difficult at the higher levels of fear which can be absolutely terrifying.

Inner core is not always visible. It takes an effort to self-remember. This is not always possible even doing normal times and so has to be practiced in between episodes. When caught up with the delusions this is much more difficult. Yet with practice at the lower levels of fear it can be built up gradually by climbing the ladder of fear through graded exposure.

Eventually some of the worst periods get to be more manageable. In my case I sometimes get so frightened I thought I was going to pass out. The difficulty here is that if it happens when out and about it could be dangerous and relies on someone to bring with you to call for help.

The experience of this is that the prospect of passing out adds to the fear. This happens to me about once a week but rarely lasts for more than an hour. All the same while it is happening if there is no insight the fact it will pass soon doesn't seem to matter. You have to get through the episode as best you can.

With milder levels of fear, you can get through it in a number of ways either willy nilly or by muddling through. I tell myself that if you are going through hell keep going and hell is the operative word here. Schizophrenia is a journey through the valley of death and you are alone with this. Yet at the higher levels which are terrifying this sort of thinking is not effective.

At these points I think of ringing the emergency line but that might mean ending up back in hospital. Yet this would just make things worse and the overload would get worse too. In some ways it is better to be at home but the effect of this feeling is more peripheral during a crisis.

At these levels sometimes all you can focus on is the fear. You are not aware of your surroundings so the homely distraction is not effective. All the same you have still have the thoughts that you are in your safe place but they are much more marginal in a crisis.

The overload is still happening once a week and at these times it is present in the forefront of the mind. It helps to recognize at some point the subconscious will take over again and the symptoms will stop. Again here there can be a little insight which allows you to tell yourself things will return to normal. But often the insight only works so far and doesn't stop the fear being the main experience.

The other helpful thought involved is that you can sometimes remember that the symptoms will be coming and going from past experience. So, the thought does enter your head that things will get back to normal. What you have to do is hang in there knowing the paranoia will pass.

So, that still leaves coping with the experience while it is happening. I don't cope with it using any of the calming down strategies usually offered. For example, thinking you are in a safe place doesn't help when you are in a lot of emotional pain and experiencing a mind numbing fear, although this does not always happen.

The thought of passing out and visualising the consequences of what is happening is also emotionally painful and that again can overload the mind. But here the fear can tend to shut down the emotional side though this doesn't often happen. Still that doesn't make the crisis any more easier to be deal with. During these time the fear is the major symptom.

The dizziness of passing out is physically uncomfortable and again is frightening. This is adding to the overwhelming experience yet you can feel this and the fear in your body. Being mindful of the fear in your body instead of being caught up in the unreality of your thoughts can help with these times. It makes it more likely to calm the body down by localising the fear experience where it occurs.

Mostly though it is necessary not to panic and flip out as this would stop the possibility of controlling the symptoms. This means different coping strategies are needed in addition to the usual ways of calming down. What you have to do is keep the delusion in mind so it doesn't go over your head and keep a lid on the fear.

It is at these points that the overload needs dealing with. If the more constant states of anxiety and fear have been dealt with to do this, it is necessary to find ways of triggering the delusion to practice this exposure. Ordinarily the delusions can come and go seemingly of its own volition. They are also triggered by flashback, memories and associations.

This has to be handled carefully so that it avoids being immersed in the delusional world of its unreality. Instead the mind needs focused on instead as an object of thought. Being exposed in a place with psychotic memories might be overwhelming as you are surrounded by threat. It was better to have something more localised.

This leaves the problem of how to trigger the delusion. The answer was to watch a video about 9/11 and confront it head on. It was also necessary to have a support worker with me to help so my mind didn't run from the situation.

One other problem I encountered here was having your thoughts broadcast in the media. This is a common schizophrenic symptom but with help from the support I didn't flip out. So my mind stopped hallucinating things on the screen.

That allowed me contemplate what had happened and then to question whether I could really have caused it? It was helpful to be mindful of the delusion which allowed for thinking about it with insight. Then also to be simultaneously aware of the bodies inner core which can also help cope with the problem. So, gain to question whether I could have really done something like that?

That reminded me that looking at myself objectively I have lots of good points and could esteem these. So I could use that to question if I could have done something so bad by looking at my emotions and realising I was a warm and loving person. Overcoming the fear allowed for such an emotional engagement.

All the same my mind couldn't grasp the full reality of these delusions and that didn't allow for a complete realisation. I still thought I had caused what I was watching in the 9/11 video and the experience still went over my head. The thoughts were still there at the back of my mind. Yet the positive outcome was that at milder levels of fear this exposure meant I could tackle the problem so far.

This was particularly helpful with day to day living as I wasn't living in fear of the terrifying episodes. I could even think about them without overreacting as I knew that they were short lived and I always came through them. At the times of the peaks in terror however there was less insight and getting through them was very difficult.

Finally, it is worth noting that taking tablets early can get you to sleep and can act as a back up plan to stop the stress. Yet by this time the delusions are still firmly in mind and that doesn't always stop you dreaming about them. Sleeping offers no escape from the stress though at the milder levels of anxiety and fear there is less likely that you will dream about your thoughts.

Conclusion

Schizophrenia is a nightmarish condition and generate dreams that are just as bad. Eliminating these dreams allows an invaluable nights' rest which means you can start each day free from the paranoia. It takes a coping strategy for dealing with the daily living in schizophrenia and requires an overall approach to life with the illness. This involving the coping strategies, supported graded exposure and the other things outlined above. So, that the subconscious outcomes of the illness will make life with the illness more worthwhile.