Physical Therapy for Survivors of Torture

April 17, 2013
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Goals for Presentation

1) Identify 4 issues present in torture survivors that may be addressed by P.T.
2) List 3 indicators for referral to P.T. and learn 2 key points for facilitating referral
3) Describe 3 ways that P.T. can avoid re-traumatizing clients
4) Identify 3 common techniques used by P.T.’s working with survivors of torture
Physical and psychological aspects of torture

Physical torture usually directed at musculoskeletal system

Torture methods of suspension, beatings, forced positions, strapping, sexual and electric torture all lead to pain and injury

There are also many physical effects of stress itself

Complex mind/body connections which may be difficult for both client and others to sort out
First international conference of P.T.’s treating torture survivors 1994, Copenhagen

Many centers world and nation-wide have physical therapy either on-site or close referral relationship

CVT has had volunteer P.T.’s in Minnesota for 21 years and has staff physiotherapy trainers, physiotherapists and U. S. P.T. advisors in Jordan and Kenya
Long History of P.T. with Torture Survivors

* First international conference of P.T.’s treating torture survivors 1994, Copenhagen (IRCT/RCT, now Dignity—Danish Institute Against Torture)
* Many centers world and nation-wide have physical therapy either on-site or close referral relationship
* CVT has had volunteer P.T.’s in Minnesota for 21 years and has staff physiotherapy trainers, physiotherapists and U. S. P.T. advisors in Jordan and Kenya. I am one of many.
Quotes from torture survivors in Minnesota

“The pain in my body is a constant reminder of my torture.”
Quotes from torture survivors in Minnesota

“The torturers told me that I would never get better. They were wrong! Now I am so much better and I know that the torturers were wrong and that they lied to me.”
Quotes from torture survivors in Minnesota

“My hard work doing my exercises has helped me to improve. I feel that I am defeating my torturers by regaining my function.”
Client Issues Which P.T. May Address

* Chronic pain in head, joints and muscles
* Decreased posture and overall mobility
* Inability to perform typical activities such as walking, lifting, child care, sleeping comfortably, sports and recreation
* Decreased strength, range-of-motion, coordination, balance
* Sensory changes, vision changes and dizziness
* Pelvic floor issues
Client Issues Which P.T. May Address

* Body awareness:
  * Judge distance from self
  * Localize pain
  * Imitate movements easily

* Self regulation
  * Alter breathing rate and pattern
  * Alter speed and intensity of activity
  * Have appropriate energy level
  * Calm self after high energy activity
  * Relaxation
Role of Dissociation

- Good survival strategy at the time of torture
- Later, can contribute to feeling disconnected, foggy, not at home in one’s own body
- Body image drawings:
  - Used by P.T. at Berlin Center for Torture Victims
  - Help to direct treatment and to monitor progress
  - Drawings clearly show how survivors often view themselves before physical and psychological treatment
This client felt very disconnected from his body.
He was focused on pain in his feet from falanga torture.
Sketch of Body Image 2

This client saw her body as an amorphous blob. Ovals are areas where she felt the most pain.
This client has ringing in the ear, headache, pain in feet and elbows
Role of Dissociation

* Improvements noted in drawings after course of P.T. and psychological counseling

* Amazingly, by end of treatments, client’s body images were typical and well-proportioned
Indicators for Referral to P.T.

- Acute/chronic pain
- Falanga torture
- Decreased posture, body awareness, self regulation, proprioception
- Decreased strength, ROM
- Decreased mobility/ability to perform desired activities
Keys for Facilitating Appropriate P.T. Referral

- P.T. departments that see large numbers of refugees
- Which P.T. is comfortable working with survivors of trauma and torture
- Release of client information? Ask.
- Select records to P.T. to sensitize P.T. to special needs of client from first session
Avoiding Re-traumatization

- May do evaluation over several sessions and pace hands on assessment
- Avoid excessive questions initially so does not feel like an interrogation
- Be on time
- Doors or curtain open if desired by client
- Ask permission before touching client, and check in about how is tolerating. (Touch can be extremely therapeutic for client!)
Avoiding Re-traumatization

* Give clients choice in all matters related to treatment:
  * Positions to treat in
  * Issues to focus on
  * Speed of treatment progression
* Some modalities may be similar to torture experiences, but may be well tolerated – be sensitive
* Caution with mirrors, bright lights, uniforms
Physical Therapy Techniques

- Emphasize home program of exercises and modalities to promote self-efficacy in being able to decrease pain, increase mobility
- Hands on techniques if accepted
- Progressive work for balance and fluency of movements
- Pelvic floor treatment
Physical Therapy Techniques

- Pool exercises
- Sensory awareness techniques
- Specialized treatment for falanga torture
  - 60-page book about this – free
- Equipment
  - Canes, walkers, shoe inserts, knee/back braces, etc.
Community Exercise Options

- Group P.T. sessions
  - CVT-Jordan program
  - Group by physical issues OR
  - Group by body awareness issues/self-regulation deficits
- Team sports
- Bicycle donations, clubs (see 11/16/09 webinar)
- Hiking groups
- Health club
- Exercise DVD
Resources

Full article available for free download through Dignity – the Danish Institute Against Torture: www.dignityinstitute.org


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- For the list at the Dignity Library of all 404 articles, lectures, etc. about PT and torture, the link is: [http://www.reindex.org/RCT/main/Hits.php?ColSearch=node0_0&qe=physiotherapy&tgtGroup%5B%5D=1032&tgtGroup%5B%5D=1033&PortalMode=1&tgtPos=1&SearchMode=lay](http://www.reindex.org/RCT/main/Hits.php?ColSearch=node0_0&qe=physiotherapy&tgtGroup%5B%5D=1032&tgtGroup%5B%5D=1033&PortalMode=1&tgtPos=1&SearchMode=lay)
The following may be requested, free, via library@dignityinstitute.dk - they will mail a copy to you:

- Torture Survivors-Introduction to Physiotherapy. World Confederation for Physical Therapy--Barcelone, Spain 2003
- Falanga Torture-Diagnostic Considerations, Assessment and Treatment. Amris, K, and Prip, Karen. (59 page book)


Thank you so much!

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* Many free resources to establish your own library of books and articles about torture treatment on list of supporting tools