



Cognitive-behavioral and graded exercise therapies for chronic fatigue (syndrome) are associated with lower levels of work/school attendance

Frank N. M. Twisk¹

Received: January 31, 2019 / Accepted: March 20, 2019 / Published online: March 28, 2019
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2019

In a recent article Ali and colleagues report their findings on psychological and demographic factors associated with fatigue and social adjustment in young people with severe Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) (Ali et al., 2019). According to the study (Ali et al., 2019) stronger fear avoidance beliefs at baseline (T1) were associated with higher fatigue approximately 5 months later (T2) and worse social adjustment at T1 and T2, and female gender and treatment were associated with lower work/school attendance at T1 and T2. Ali et al. (2019) conclude: “Fearful beliefs about activity could be targeted using cognitive-behavioural interventions”.

Firstly, relating to diagnosis, the patients investigated cannot be qualified as CFS patients, let alone ME patients. The patients were selected using the discredited Oxford criteria (Green et al., 2015) for chronic fatigue (CF), which only require chronic fatigue (Sharpe et al., 1991). Next to chronic fatigue, the diagnosis CFS (Fukuda et al., 1994) requires at least four out of eight specific symptoms to be present. CF (Green et al., 2015) is not the same as CFS (Fukuda et al., 1994), while ME (Dowsett et al., 1990) is by definition not equivalent to CFS (Twisk, 2018). ME is a neuromuscular disease, with prolonged muscle fatigability/post-exertional muscle weakness and “neurological disturbance, especially of cognitive, autonomic and sensory functions” as distinctive features (Dowsett et al., 1990).

Secondly, the authors (Ali et al., 2019) claim Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), in reality a combination of CBT and Graded Exercise Therapy (GET) (Burgess & Chalder, 2011), to be an effective rehabilitative treatment for CFS. Even more the same authors suggest patients with severe CFS can recover by CBT/GET (Burgess & Chalder, 2011). However the study (Ali et al., 2019) observed that treatment, in most cases (25/41) treatment included CBT and/or GET, was associated with lower work/school attendance at baseline and after 5 months. This finding underlines the thesis that CBT/GET is neither effective nor safe (Twisk & Corsius, 2018), a position which was recently also expressed by members of British parliament (House of Commons Hansard, 2019).

Thirdly, while Ali et al. (2019) acknowledge that their study “did not allow for causal inferences to be made”, that fearful beliefs could have “developed as a result of being so severely ill”, and that treatment, in most cases CBT/GET alone or combined with other (cognitive-behavioral) therapies, were associated with lower work or school attendance, they propose that ‘fearful avoidance beliefs about activity’ can be targeted with CBT/GET. However the findings contradict their recommendation.

People with ME and CFS are trapped in a catch-22 situation: ‘fear avoidance’ is “a rational defence mechanism to avoid long-lasting relapses” (Twisk, 2015). In conclusion, the study affirms the relevance of an accurate diagnosis (ME, CFS or CF) and the thesis that CBT and GET are neither effective nor safe. It’s time for another approach (House of Commons Hansard, 2019).

✉ Frank N. M. Twisk
frank.twisk@hetnet.nl

¹ ME-de-patiënten Foundation, Zonnedaaw 15,
1906 HB Limmen, The Netherlands

References

- Ali, S., Adamczyk, L., Burgess, M., & Chalder, T. (2019). Psychological and demographic factors associated with fatigue and social adjustment in young people with severe chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis: A preliminary mixed-methods study. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-019-00010-x>
- Burgess, M., & Chalder, T. (2011). Adolescents with severe chronic fatigue syndrome can make a full recovery. *BMJ Case Rep*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bcr.01.2011.3716>
- Dowsett, E. G., Ramsay, A. M., McCartney, R. A., & Bell, E. J. (1990). Myalgic Encephalomyelitis—A persistent enteroviral infection? *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, 66, 526–530. <https://doi.org/10.1136/pgmj.66.777.526>
- Fukuda, K., Straus, S. E., Hickie, I., Sharpe, M., Dobbins, J. G., & Komaroff, A. L. (1994). The chronic fatigue syndrome: A comprehensive approach to its definition and study. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 121, 953–959. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-121-12-199412150-00009>
- Green, C. R., Cowan, P., Elk, R., O’Neil, K. M., & Rasmussen, A. L. (2015). National institutes of health pathways to prevention workshop: Advancing the research on myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 162, 860–865. <https://doi.org/10.7326/m15-0338>
- House of Commons Hansard. (2019). *Appropriate ME treatment*. London. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-01-24/debates/FA1BBC27-37A7-4BFD-A2C0-A58B57F41D4D/AppropriateMETreatment>. Accessed 31 Jan 2019
- Sharpe, M. C., Archard, L. C., Banatvala, J. E., Borysiewicz, L. K., Clare, A. W., David, A., et al. (1991). Chronic fatigue syndrome: Guidelines for research. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84, 118–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014107689108400224>
- Twisk, F. N. M. (2015). Post-exertional malaise in chronic fatigue syndrome. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 2, e8–e9. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366\(15\)00044-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366(15)00044-9)
- Twisk, F. N. M. (2018). Myalgic encephalomyelitis, chronic fatigue syndrome, and systemic exertion intolerance disease: Three distinct clinical entities. *Challenges*, 9, 19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/challe9010019>
- Twisk, F. N. M., & Corsius, L. A. M. M. (2018). Cognitive-behavioural therapy for chronic fatigue syndrome: Neither efficacious nor safe. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 213, 500–501. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2018.136>

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.