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NLP for Stage Anxiety: A Qualitive Research

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Abstract

Stage anxiety may disturb the spiritual health of the individual, especially as it may adversely affect the professional success of the people who perform music professionally. The use of beta-blockers, substances or alcohol at the presence of the musical performance may not be a solution oriented behavior. Within the light of these problems, this study aims to search the usage of Neuro-Lingiustic Programming, which is a collection of communication and behaviour change techniques, for relieving and treating stage anxiety. A qualitive design has been used for this research, interviews with the NLP experts and counseleees whom had previously gone through with NLP sessions for treating stage anxiety have been held. In addition, a session of stage anxiety treatment has been observed in order to enlighten the process. Snowball sampling method has been used for data collection. The findings were reported and suggestions were given.

Keywords: Stage anxiety, music performance, applied music

Introduction

Music performance includes diverse skills such as coordination, attention, memory, aesthetics and interpretation, and motor skills (Salmon and Meyer, 1992). Stage anxiety (Music performance anxiety, MPA); a special type of anxiety which is a fear that a potential problem that may arise during performance and the musician may fear to be negatively assessed by the audience. Physiological and psychological fear is triggered by events like a concert or a performance exam. Many musicians have discouraging experiences that suggest they will not be able to fully use their capacities. High anxiety levels lead a coaction of automatic motor reactions (Allen, 2010). Kenny (2008), who has various research in this regard, has described musical performance anxiety as a persistent, disturbing experience about performance skills to be demonstrated in front of the community, regardless of the level of ability, education or preparation of the individual.

Stage fear may lead to the development of a variety of medical and psychological symptoms, including general anxiety disorder and depression. As a result, individuals who experience MPA may be directed to inappropriate behaviors such as beta blockers, alcohol, and substance abuse. Moreover, according to various research, it was seen that there is a negative relationship between high level musical performance anxiety and healthy lifestyle (Doğan, 2013).

NLP stands for Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Neuro refers to neurology; Linguistic refers to language; programming refers to neural language functions. In other words, learning NLP is like learning the language of the mind. It is a collection of communication and behaviour change techniques NLP (as a tool in psychology) was born in the late 70's from observations by Richard Bandler on the psychotherapy sessions of the excellent therapists, namely Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, and Milton Erickson, increasing the effects of positive suggestions for clients (Witkowsky, 2010). Because of its applicability, NLP was then utilised by practitioners in order to

assess and treat a variety of clinical symptoms including depression, anxiety, and stress. It has been used in a wide range of fields worldwide including management, business, education, and sports (NLP, 2019).

Within the light of these problems, this study aims to search the usage of NLP for relieving and treating stage anxiety. Within the light of this primary purpose, the opinions of the NLP counsellors and musicians whom participaded in NLP sessions have been taken. The interviews are based on the counselees' previous and ongoing experiences about stage and the effect of NLP.

Methodology

A qualitive design has been used for this research, interviews with 2 NLP experts and 3 counseleees whom had previously gone through with NLP sessions for treating stage anxiety have been held. In addition, a session of stage anxiety treatment has been observed in order to enlighten the process. Snowball sampling method has been used for data collection.

Findings

In this section, the interviews with the 2 counselor and 3 counselees and the session observation are reported. In the interview report, the counselees are numerated as CE1, CE2 and CE3; counsellors' opinions are listed as CR1 and CR2. The findings show that one of the counselees instrument is violin, one of them plays the flute and one is a piano performer. 2 of the counselee participants had an undergraduate degree of music education, 1 is music education undergraduate programme student. Two of the counselees took their NLP sessions 1-3 years ago, one took NLP session recently. All of the participants benefit from the usage of NLP for stage anxiety. None of them reported a regression in the effects of NLP treatment through time. Also none of them experienced poor performance regarded with stage fear after the NPL session. All of them took one NLP session.

Counselor Interviews

In this section, data gathered from the counseller interview form are given.

1. What is your opinion about the effect of NLP in the treatment of stage anxiety?

CR1. NLP aims to reprogram the mind in order to use both consciousness and unconsciousness effectively, so that in eliminating stage anxiety, NLP can minimize or even eliminate the level of intense anxiety that a person would feel when they are on stage.

CR2. With NLP, the musician visualizes the moment of stage which causes them anxiety, as an external observer without internalizing it. They have the chance to observe the symptoms of anxiety occurring in their body and mind, re-evaluate the moment as an internal observer. That way NLP may reset the effects of the symptoms at the end of the session.

2. Do you offer your counselees an alternative diagnosis or supportive treatment before the session?

CR1. Regular breathing exercises, relaxation movements can be shown. Regular meditation is known to help prevent anxiety.

CR2. It is useful to combine several methods in NLP implementation instead of a single method. Meditation, yoga, learning proper breathing might help.

3. How many sessions can be sufficient to achieve NLP results in stage anxiety?

CR1. Usually in a single NLP session, a decrease in stage anxiety or even complete disappearance may be observed. If the client experiences stage anxiety after the session, the same technique or a different NLP technique may be applied.

CR2. After one NLP session symptoms are expected to be relieved. Also if decreased or disappeared anxiety reappears in the following weeks, the same technique can be applied again, or with other techniques of NLP.

4. Do sessions take place individually or with groups?

CR1. and CR2. Sessions are individual.

5. How do the sessions process?

CR1. We ask the client to assume that they are in a cinema or theater. We allow them to make observations. We tell that they are in total control of the film and that it will be whatever they want it to be. It can make variations such as whether the film is black and white or colored, moving or stable.

We ask the person to visualize the situation that created the phobia on the cinema screen and to visualize the incident from the beginning to the end of the scene on his mind as if it was a movie. We then take the person from the external observer position in the cinema hall and gradually move him into the internal observer position. In this process, it should carefully be observed whether the counselee is comfortable or not. At the last stage, we show that the person can calmly complete the stage performance without any fear or anxiety. This last stage is repeated several times and in the last stage the situation that causes anxiety is adapted to the future. This way phobia is tested. If the client is calm in the adaptation to the future, the phobia is significantly reduced or completely gone.

CR2. Cinema technique would be the best. The counselee visualises oneself in a theatre, playing his/her own movie of music performance with absolute control of the script. Then the visions should level up to internal observer position. The sequence is repeated until the musicians' visualisations are ended without anxiety symptoms.

6. What should be the characteristics of the session room

CR1. and CR2. It is convenient for the counselee to sit comfortably in a quiet environment.

7. During the session, does the client show symptoms such as mood changes, panic or pain?

CR1. In the applied technique, while the person imagines itself on stage, may show signs of panic. In this case, the counselee is asked to slow down the visualisation of the movie theater. Support may be provided from techniques that would make the counselee feel safer.

CR2. In case of threating anxiety, the NLP expert should find the counselees trigger of panic in the visualisation. Musicians' own stage fear symptoms are expected to be seen at the sessions.

8. How long does the session take place?

CR1. Usually 30-40 minutes

CR2. Approximately half an hour.

9. Before or after the session, are there factors such as nutrition, movement and environment that the client should pay attention to?

CR1. and CR2. Physiological needs such as hunger or thirst should be fulfilled before the session.

10. After the session, how long does it take to see a reduction at anxiety?

CR1. The effect is expected to be efficient instantly.

CR2. Immediate improvement is possible.

11. After the session, when is the right time to participate in a musical performance?

CR1. There is no time limitation, even after 5 minutes is ok.

CR2. At sessions final vision, we expect to that the anxiety symptoms are relived. The effect would be more permanent if the councelee performs at stage within a month.

12. Does the effect of NLP permanent in most cases?

CR1. It depends on the counselee. It may be permanent or may need a repetition.

CR2. It was permanent for my cases.

13. After the session, are there any situations that may cause a regression of the sessions' effect?

CR1.If the person experience stage to trigger phobia, there may be stage anxiety all over again.

CR2. The counselees forthcoming stage experiences would be decisive.

14: Final statements to be refered

CR1. There may be cases where the NLP technique is not successful in any way. It is independent of the person's level of anxiety, personal history, character or external factors. In case of failure, the client should not feel bad. Not all techniques are suitable for every person. In such cases, the NLP practitioner can refer the person to different professionals.

Counselee Interviews

In this section, data gathered from the counsellee interview form are given.

1. How have your stage fear emerged?

CE1. Started at high school, I have been on stage before with no anxiety.

CE2. I had a bad stage performance.

CE3. Since I started to play an instrument.

2. Howlong have you been suffering from Stage fear.

CE1. and CE3. More than ten years.

CE2. Two years.

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3. Have you had any estimation about the source of your stage fear?

CE1. At high school, my applied music instructor has changed, I was intimidated, the anxiety was there at the courses for years.

CE2. At the student concert in my school, I had a low performance and my parents scolded me at home.

CE3. I have an anxious nature.

4. Before performance, how have you been usually feeling?

CE1. Elevated heart beat, shortness of breath, thoughts of potential failure.

CE2. I could not see the sheetmusic because of panic sensation.

CE3. I have been feeling thirsty and faint. My hands go numb.

5. During the performance, how were your emotions and thoughts?

CE1. It was impossible to focus on music because of panic sensation.

CE2. Cthastrophic thoughts were flowing one by one about the sheetmusic in front of me, my technique, musicality.

CE3. The presence of the audience watching me playing makes it impossible for me to play music.

6. Have you considered a coping strategy before NLP?

CE1. I changed my instructor. I got along much better with The New one. My teacher realised that I was sensitive. I was now relieved in courses but finals were still a problem. So I used beta blockers for a while but after idle time, it also has not worked.

CE2. I saw my family physicinan whom prescribed beta blockers. It caused low blood pressure.

CE3. I took sedatives before my applied music exam once. It affects cognitive process playing music.

7. Have you tried alcohol, sedatives or antidepressants?

CE1. and CE2. People around me usually object the usage of them, no.

CE3. I only tried sedatives and it was not affective so I seeked a non-medicational way to cope.

8. When did you seek professional help?

CE1. I saw a psychologist that ended up with beta blockers.

CE2. When my current schools auction was close.

CE3. I wanted to be able to play in front of an audience, I mean even kids can do it.

9. How have you considered NLP?

CE1. A friend of mine told me about it.

CE2. I have read about an NLP session in a novel so I searched if it was convenient in my situation.

CE3. While I was searching anxiety treatment options on the web, I came across NLP.

10. Before the session, what has the councelor told you?

CE1., CE2. and CE3. That the session is going to take mostly 30 minutes, and that I may trust the process, and my stage fear may be surpassed instantly in one session. My opinions were asked about the source of my stage fear.

11. How did the session take place?

CE1. We used visualisation. The councelor leaded visions: "You come to the stage, look at the audience, start playing, bow to the audience and leave the stage." We repeated the rituel in several conditions. Like your parents are the audience your friends this time... When the part "You play, you leave. You play, you leave. You play, you leave …" comes, the specialist leads the visions really fast repeatedly and I feel a bit anxious. When we started the rituel with the vision which my former applied music teacher, I had panic sensation during the part of "play-leave" so we had to stop the session.After I calm down, the counselor informed me that we will do this again. At first, the teacher was at the backside of the concert hall, next try the teacher came a bit forward. At the last one, he was watching in the front seat and I was playing calmly. It was gone.

CE2. and CE3. Visualisation technique was used as reported in example CE1. CE2. was triggered by his parents to be the audience. CE3. was triggered by the concert hall and the audience itself so the visualisation sequence started again for small groups of audience like a home concert for the family, a classroom concert for friends, and finally the concert hall.

11. How did you feel after the session?

CE1. I was exhausted so I went to sleep.

CE2. I was a bit overwhelmed.

CE3. Even though I was feeling sensitive, I was aware that something has changed in me.

12. When did you consider a music performance after the session?

CE1. Within a month. I have never had a concert after highschool because of fear. The anxiety in finals was enough for me. A friend of mine asked me to play a few pieces at her workplace and I was willing to try.

CE2. The schools auction was 2 weeks after the session.

CE3. I gathered my family and a few friends as an audience for a home concert.

13. How was your experience?

CE1. At first I was a bit of anxious but no cthastrophic thoughts this time. At first piece my sheetmusic droped on the floor. I stoped playing and told the audience that I will take it from the beginning. This time I was even calmer. It felt like I was practising by myself. I was able to focus on the music only and other facts were like not even there. I enjoyed the appreciation afterwards.

CE2. I thought that I was playing inside a sphere which protects me from outer threats. I tried not to look at the audience. After a while, I was able to focus on music and I completed the performance without any incidents.

CE3. I was nervous still, but this time I managed to keep it under control.

Discussion and Conclusion

It should be noted that despite NLP's wide practical applications, the tool has not been well-accepted in mainstream psychology. One primary criticism of NLP is its underdeveloped scientific evidence of its effectiveness regarded to proper research methodology. The limited quality of research focused on NLP is reported in a number of review articles. (Witkowski, 2010). Thirty-five years of research on neuro-linguistic programming conducted a meta-analysis on over 300 papers reporting the use of NLP in some manner and examined 33 of these in closer detail. He concluded that NLP might be ineffective. Some studies assessed by Witkowski were also conducted by researchers with no apparent training in NLP. It's contravertial that before any such decision is made on the effectiveness (or not) of NLP, studies should be conducted with trained professionals.

Based on these outcomes, it would be suitable to consider an NLP threatment to relieve stage fear. However, it should be noted that as a result of the qualitive design of this study, the outcomes can not be generalized to the universe of individuals who are suffering from stage fear and seeking professional help.

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