“Equifinality” and Treatment-Resistant Depression

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This issue of Psychiatric Annals, guest edited by Asim A. Shah, MD, focuses on the available modalities for treatment-resistant depression (TRD).


Next, the article, “Electroconvulsive Therapy, Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, and Deep Brain Stimulation in Treatment-Resistant Depression,” by Drs. Robin Livingston, Sharadamani Anandan, and Moukaddam identifies the most recent advances in electroconvulsive therapy, transcranial magnetic stimulation, and deep brain stimulation for use in patients with TRD. The final article, “Medical Decision-Making Capacity in Depression,” by Drs. Britta Ostermeyer, Araceli Flores, Charles Dukes, and Shah explains the importance of clinicians assessing capacity for decision-making because many patients with TRD either refuse or are nonadherent with treatment instructions.

Words can be quite important and the term “equifinality,” which means reaching the same end state through different mechanisms, is a useful way of viewing TRD. Some patients designated as “TRD” are in fact treatment intolerant and their history shows it—they have found many treatments of no use, but a review of their history shows that they have rejected numerous options only after a few days with side-effect complaints. Other patients are chronically demoralized by life’s stresses. Patients with that mindset when asked what they would do if they won the lottery might smile and say, “that would solve all my problems.” Depressed patients will often improve as the cause of a particular stressor resolves.

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doi: 10.3928/00485713-20160301-01

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failed by 4-6 treatments), I usually try medications and psychotherapy with different mechanisms until I find a treatment that works, starting with the safest and going to the more complex. Patients with TRD should be told that determining the exact treatment that will help them is a challenge, but that persistence with various modalities will most likely result in success. The fact remains, with the knowledge that we have today, we are shooting in the dark, and many patients require many shots to hit the target. Also, in many cases, the way treatment is administered can determine the result.

Essentially, equifinality refers to these differences that are often crucial in attaining a lasting remission. Cheers.