Never Say Never to Learning – Dynamic Cognitive Intervention (DCI) for persons with Severe Mental Illness

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe evidence-based research carried out in populations related to the field of mental health, based on the theories and work done by Prof. Reuven Feuerstein. These studies originated from Hadas-Lidor’s Dynamic Cognitive Intervention (DCI) approach, which is derived from Feuerstein’s Structural Cognitive Modifiability theory. DCI is specifically intended for enhancement of therapeutic-based relationships with a direct emphasis on emotional-related issues and the way they affect cognitive development.

One of the populations in which functional-cognitive abilities may be compromised is the population of people coping with mental disorders, due to effects of the illness and/or medication side effects.

The outlook for people diagnosed with mental illness has improved in the past several decades due to reasons related to brain research development, third generation medications and various psychosocial and cognitive treatments. These have allowed those coping with mental illness to achieve meaningful recovery, manage residual symptoms, and lead productive lives. Yet additional efforts are needed to consolidate these improvements and help more people with mental illness to reach these goals.

Due to the negative effects of mental illness, positive communication skills and abilities may be compromised, whether for those coping with mental illness themselves, or for those providing care for them either professionally or as family members. In order to enhance learning and cognition, improve communication and instill hope and meaning for all involved, the DCI approach provides a basis for various interventions related to mental health that promote resilience, participation and recovery.

DCI incorporates use of Mediated Learning Experiences, exercises from Feuerstein’s Instrumental Enrichment program, and additional tools developed, such as reading and writing tasks, utilization of personal picture albums and Meaningful Interactional Life Episodes (MILEs). The studies reviewed in this

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article include evidence for the benefits of DCI based interventions structured for those coping with mental illness, family, and professional caregivers.

Keywords
Feuerstein, Mental Health, Recovery, Caregivers, cognitive intervention

Introduction

Over the past fifty years the field of mental health care has greatly developed. In the past, mental illness was often associated with neuro-cognitive degeneration and chronic deterioration of cognitive functions and abilities, with no hope for rehabilitation and recovery. This usually was translated into a focus on disability and weaknesses, social exclusion, lessened participation and a lack of independence. For many years those suffering from mental illness did not receive cognitive therapy, due to the belief that the cognitive impairment was irreversible, together with the fact that cognitive intervention foundations were based on neuropsychology and therefore applied primarily for people coping with brain injury (Green et al., 2000).

In recent years there are growing interactions between the fields of mental health and neuroscience research. Current trends in research on brain plasticity, together with the exponential growth in new technology, show the brain to be a far more plastic organ than previously thought (Doidge, 2007; Kleim & Jones, 2008). After injury, the brain is capable of considerable reorganization that forms the basis for functional recovery (Sohlberg & Mateer, 2001). The fact that specific alterations in behaviour are reflected in characteristic functional changes in the brain is currently accepted by biologists (Kandel, 1998, 2006). Thus, the ideas related to cognitive modifiability expressed by Feuerstein (Feuerstein et al., 1979; Feuerstein et al., 1980), pertaining to structural cognitive changes, are being found to be not just theoretical but are becoming scientifically validated (Hadas-Lidor et al., 2011).

Thanks to the developments in the field of brain research as it relates to mental illness, together with advances in psycho-pharmacology, new attitudes and approaches that promote recovery, community integration and rehabilitation are developing. These include psycho-education and psychosocial approaches and programs, cognitive interventions, psychiatric rehabil-