

# Combination of actor's play training and assertiveness program to reduce difficulties in self-affirmation: A preliminary study.

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## BACKGROUND

Assertiveness, also called self-affirmation, is an interpersonal attitude through individuals affirming themselves while respecting others. Assertiveness is an important feature contributing to well-being. Indeed, people presenting difficulties in self-affirmation often suffer from social anxiety and feel distress (Cottraux, 2001). Indeed, combination of difficulties in assertiveness and social anxiety are often met in several psychopathologies such as depression, alcoholism, agoraphobia and personality disorders (Servant, 2002). Patients often report difficulties in six general domains: (1) to compliment, to give a present or to apply for something, (2) to criticize, (3) to respond to a compliment; (4) to state a refusal or to give an agreement; (5) to negotiate; (6) to respond to a criticism. Moreover, social anxiety inhibit patients who will then use avoidances which will strengthen assertiveness issues.

The second wave of cognitive and behavioural therapeutic procedures have already proven their effectiveness in helping patients suffering from assertiveness issues and social anxiety using exposition, cognitive restructuring, social competences and assertiveness training (Sala & Saintecatherine, 2012). The third wave of cognitive and behavioural psychotherapies added to these procedures more emotional methods such as mindfulness and negative emotions acceptance. Our study's originality is that it offers a combination of methods from the second and from the third waves. More precisely, this study aimed to test the efficacy of a therapeutic procedure combining classical assertiveness program (2<sup>nd</sup> wave) and mindfulness (3<sup>rd</sup> wave) which was practised through actor's play training.

Many patients suffering from assertiveness issues often join theatrical troupe or improvisation group to deal with their difficulties. Thus, we were interested by the psychological processes involved in the actor's play training. A psychologist and an actress worked collectively to develop a program combining knowledge of classical assertiveness programs, including role-playing, and actor's play technique. Actor's play enables patients to play the role of someone else, to not identify themselves with their characters and to develop their social creativity. Moreover, being someone else during actor's play training sessions makes emotions acceptance easier and enables patients to focus on social tasks as mindfulness does. In other words, actor's play training allows mindfulness practice. The objective of actor's play training is that patients firstly transpose what their had learned in role-playing sessions in their daily life.

Our objective was to assess the efficacy of this new psychotherapeutic procedure in a preliminary study with the hypothesis that patients will improve on different independent measures.

## PROGRAM'S DEVELOPMENT

## METHOD

### Subjects

20 participants (12 women and 8 men; age:  $M = 37,6$ ,  $SD = 8,75$ ) suffering from difficulties in assertiveness were included in this training program.

### Study design and assessment procedure

Participants were assessed before (T0) and after the training program (T1) with the same self-assessment questionnaires.

### Training program

This program consists of 10 sessions lasting three hours. These sessions were organised in five units focussed on the same topic: each unit comprised two sessions, the first animated by an actress and the second animated by a psychologist. Topics are presented in figure 1.

### Questionnaires

- Social Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (SSEQ) (Hautekèbete, Dauxert, Delevallez & Servant, 2005)
- Assertiveness - Self-Affirmation Scale (Rathus, 1973)
- Assertiveness - Self-Affirmation Scale (Cungi, Bouvard & Rey, 1998)
- Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Communication Scale (Cungi, Bouvard & Rey, 1998)
- State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) (Spielberger, 1983)
- Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck et al., 1961)

### Statistical analysis

Repeated ANOVA measures and effect sizes analysis were conducted.

Figure 1. Presentation of five units of the training program.



## RESULTS

In accordance with our hypothesis, participants scores improved after training program. Statistically significant improvements appeared for each measured variables, except for the Communication Scale (Table 1). The higher effect sizes emerged for the BDI, the Social Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, STAI-A and Cungi, Bouvard and Rey Self-Affirmation Scale.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, F and  $\eta^2$ .

Questionnaires	N	T0	T1	F	$\eta^2$
		M (SD)	M (SD)		
Social Self-Efficacy Questionnaire	14	472,29 (107,11)	583,43 (93,69)	16,41**	0,56
Self-Affirmation Scale (Rathus)	20	121,10 (24,55)	107,95 (26,00)	11,80**	0,38
Self-Affirmation Scale (Cungi, Bouvard & Rey)	20	52,10 (17,42)	64,50 (17,81)	13,79**	0,42
Self-Esteem Scale	20	23,65 (7,34)	26,65 (6,71)	5,21*	0,22
Communication Scale	20	47,80 (13,84)	52,95 (13,30)	4,02	0,17
STAI-A	17	50,18 (14,23)	38,24 (14,99)	11,99**	0,43
STAI-B	20	55,50 (10,70)	49,50 (13,57)	8,18*	0,3
BDI	20	18,35 (9,28)	10,00 (8,56)	53,36**	0,74

\*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,01$

## DISCUSSION

Statistically significant improvements appeared on behavioural, cognitive and affective symptoms which support the idea that this new psychotherapeutic program is effective. Most important changes appeared for social self-efficacy feeling, assertiveness abilities and self-esteem. Moreover, depression and anxiety's scores decreased suggesting that participants' general state has improved. Nevertheless, participants didn't reach scores obtained by control groups in studies using the same questionnaires.

In conclusion, the combination of actor's play training and classical assertiveness program helps people suffering from assertiveness issues. In other words, our results confirm that the practice of mindfulness through actor's play training helps people with social difficulties as Schimtz et al. (2012) showed it already. Notwithstanding, we can't state on the specific actor's play's effect as we don't have a control group using only classical assertiveness program. Future research should replicate this protocol using a control group to overcome our study's limitation.