

## CREATIVE MEDITATION CENTERED ON NATURAL ELEMENTS: CONSEQUENCES ON COGNITIVE PROCESSING

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### Abstract

*The article explores some of the effects of a creative meditation centered on a natural element (fire) on different aspects of cognitive functioning, commonly associated with well-being, either positively (self-esteem), or negatively (automatic negative thinking and thought suppression). The results showed that while self-esteem improves after the creative meditation, automatic negative thinking and thought suppression do not decrease significantly. The conclusion is that the creative meditation helps in getting in touch with Self, supporting a healthy self-esteem when taking into consideration the social standards, but this also means accepting both positive and negative aspects of self, including the automatic negative thinking and thought suppression. This recommends the technique as a useful tool for psychotherapeutic and personal development use, as the vulnerabilities may become the focus without unnecessary self-blame, but with an intuitive solution in mind to turn them into personal resources.*

**Keywords:** automatic negative thinking, creative meditation, self-esteem, thought suppression

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Meditation has been mentioned as a method of achieving creative insight, supported by the integration of the activity of both autonomous and the central nervous system (Shen, Yuan, Liu, Luo, 2016). Nitzan-Assayang and colleagues (2017) proved that four sessions mindfulness training helped in the recovery of those exposed to potential traumatic events by reducing the suppression and the reactivity to thoughts. A creative exercise using natural elements helped in interrupting the flow of negative thinking (Vitalia, 2014).

Meditation has been seen in a double manner: as an altered state of consciousness, but also as the process of achieving it (Zlate, 2000). Three main types of meditation have been described: by concentrating on an external or internal object, by concentrating on an internal object and then gradually expanding awareness to internal experiences, and creative meditation (Schaub, 1996). The positive effects of meditation have been presented from two time perspectives: the short time effects of actually meditating (from EEG patterns, to the interruption of the vicious cycle of automatic catastrophizing thoughts and anxiety during the panic attack, or the rumination in depression) to the effects of long time practice (Lebow, 2006). Meditation by concentration on internal objects, like breathing or some body parts, helps the person to get more and more familiar with the natural functions of her body without interfering, thus achieving in time a better understanding of its functioning, its lively nature and the positive emotions which emerge from nurturing them in

accordance, finding the fine balance between providing and retaining. It is a way of getting used to the change rhythms of the organism, fostering a healthier life pattern. Gradually expanding awareness to more facets of psychological experience is helpful in dealing with self-criticism (Schaub, 1996). Kenny and Delmonte (1986) discuss the possibility of reaching a higher level of abstraction in the form of life meaning by the “expansion of the perceptual field, opening up the mind to new phenomena, jumping from one topic to another and trying to find new connections between this increased range of events” (p.9) in a restricted area of interest. They emphasize the transcendent effects of meditation: apparent opposites take their place in a bigger picture, helping the person getting in touch with high order personal constructs. The creative meditation adds the resource of imagination in dealing with deep emotional pain by connecting the Ego with the profound wisdom of Self, the effects being amplified when using natural elements. In the Experiential Psychotherapy of Unification, it is used to help the person become aware of her internal difficulties, but also the personal resources to overcome them (Mitrofan, 2004; Răban-Motounu, 2014b). It is important to be followed by psychological analysis in order to help in applying the solutions in real life situations and supporting well-being (Răban-Motounu and Vitalia, 2013).

The **general objective** of this research was to assess the effects of a creative meditation centered on a natural element (fire) on the global self-esteem, but also on some cognitive biases associated with anxiety or depression: automatic negative thoughts and the tendency to suppress them. The practical objective was to improve the participants’ self-esteem so that they make sense of their experience. The main hypothesis was that the creative meditation centered on the fire element would help the participants extend their perspective and become more aware of both their needs and resources, conscious and unconscious, thus having a more realistic self-image as a basis of assessing self-worth, and contributing to a higher self-esteem. We also anticipated that one single exercise would not be enough to act upon the cognitive tendencies of thought suppression and automatic negative thinking.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative design was used to explore the effects of a creative meditation centered on a natural element. The methods were: the experiment, psychometric, and statistical methods. The independent variable was the participation in the creative meditation exercise. The dependent variables were: the self-esteem, the automatic negative thoughts, the tendency to use suppression as a defense mechanism. In the two studies, we have conducted a one group quasi-experiment, comparing the scores obtained by the participants in the creative meditation (at the end) with the normative scores on Romanian population.

The creative meditation centered on the fire element combines focusing on trainer’s instructions, and the same time coming with the personal material (Răban-Motounu, 2013). In the beginning, the trainer gives instructions for the participants to focus on their internal activity and attain a state of light relaxation. Afterwards, the suggestions come with some events, soliciting and allowing the time for the participants to focus and come with personal details: from inside a house they explore the life in the light and shadows of a regular day, afterwards the sky becomes darker, and a storm begins. Inside is darker and colder. A thunder lights up an old tree. They go outside to take fire from it and light the fire inside the house. In the last phase, they focus on the personal experience in front of the fire, with instructions of becoming aware of all sort of memories of personal experiences, feelings and thoughts towards them, all leading to a personal goal which they feel is the most important for them at the moment. All along the exercise, the participants receive instructions of

becoming aware of their internal activity (sensations and perceptions, representations, fantasies, thoughts, memories, feelings, needs and desires).

**Participants:** Third year psychology students in a practical lesson of “Introduction to Psychotherapy”, seven females and four males, took part in the first exercise (mean age 23 years, S.D. 3.02). In the second application were involved students in a practical lesson of “Trends and Currents in Psychotherapy”, seven females and three males, with the mean age of 22,8 years (SD 2,04). The exercise was introduced as part of the regular course activity.

**Instruments:**

*The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSE, Rosenberg, 2006) is a ten-item questionnaire addressing the personal perspective over the global self-worth related to the social standards. Starting from a 4-step Likert scale for each item, it allows the calculation of a single total score ranging from 10 to 40. For this research, we used an adaptation for the Romanian population, in terms of content and norms.

*The Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire* (ATQ, Hollon and Kendall, 2006) is a short questionnaire assessing negative thoughts typically associated with depression in adults. It contains 15 items scored on a 5-step Likert scale, referring to the frequency of a specific negative thought, the higher the frequency the higher the tendency to be automatically activated by a specific event in combination with a negative belief.

*The White Bear Suppression Inventory* (WBSI, Wegner and Zanakos, 2006) is a questionnaire which measures thought suppression, a defense mechanism often associated with obsessive thinking in anxiety disorders or with depression, using 15 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale, expressing the respondent’s agreement with the item. Higher total score is an expression of stronger suppression tendencies.

**Procedure:** The creative meditation centered on fire element was conducted by the regular teacher, also a certified experientialist psychotherapist, in the classroom, with musical background. After ending the creative meditation, the students filled in the questionnaires, and discussed their experience during the exercise (the first group only the WBSI, the second group all three questionnaires).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From each group, we have excluded from the statistical analysis two participants due to their extremely high scores on ATQ and WBSI, typically associated with high depression and anxiety, For the first group, the one sample t test for the WBSI scores was  $t=-1,444$ ,  $p=,188$ . For the second group, for the RSES  $t=4,364$ ,  $p=,003$ , for ATQ  $t=-1,985$ ,  $p=-,088$ , for WBSI  $t=-0,333$ ,  $p=,746$ .

The fire element is a symbol for the paternal (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994; Eliade, 2006) and its interpretations are multiple, in the most profound sense aiming at the higher order relation between Self and Ego, the higher, infinite wisdom the Ego strives for. Rossano (2007) has highlighted the importance the rituals around fire (which may be considered a form of meditation by concentrating on an external element) hold in facilitating healthy development in humans, especially by stimulating the development of the regions of the brain responsible with working memory and focused attention. The results argue in the favor of the idea that creative mediation has a highly-nuanced effect: It supports a more positive self-esteem without eliminating the cognitive dysfunctions, thus encouraging personal development. The person can focus on the parts of her inner functioning which interfere with well-being without becoming self-critical, but with a solution for self-improvement by first becoming fully aware and accepting the parts that need improvement (specific cognitive tendencies, usually associated with negative emotions and problematic past experiences). It is important to mention that, while other types of meditation, such as mindfulness

training, may bring inner peace, but they do not encourage development (Wellwood, 2006), the use of creative meditation for clinical purposes needs proper psychological and spiritual training (Schaub, 1996).

The effects on the self-esteem scores may be explained by the participants making a change in balancing the importance of self-knowledge and standards imposed by others. We consider this to be a change in the cognitive perspective of the self which became more positive because the participants were given the opportunity and time to focus on their personal aspects, and only to reasonably emphasize the exterior standards. When people lose contact with themselves, become less aware of their personal functioning, and tend to focus more and more on these external standards, but this way they also become less able to reach a realistic self-evaluation as they lack self-knowledge, expressed in the continuous tendency to devalue self.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

A creative meditation centered on a natural element has a nuanced effect which makes it suitable for both personal development and clinical use, as it combines attention focusing, with awareness expansion on the internal functioning, and imaginary exploration of possible aspects of Self.

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