

Frequently asked questions # 3

Mediation of treatments

Q: What do you mean by “mediation”?

A: A mediator is something that is changed by the treatment and which in turn is associated with improvement. Mediation gives us information about how treatments work, in other words, through which mechanisms the treatment has its effect on outcomes.

Q: Are you saying that CFS is caused by fear and avoidance?

A: This paper was not designed to answer such a question; we found that reducing fear and consequent avoidance of physical activity played a major part in explaining how cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and graded exercise therapy (GET) worked in helping patients improve their symptoms and disability. This does not address how CFS/ME starts in the first place.

Q: Do these results mean that CFS is psychological or “all in the mind”?

A: No. The way that rehabilitation in the form of GET and CBT helps to improve symptoms and disability is largely by reducing fear and avoidance of physical activity, which will have physical effects as much as psychological effects.

Q: Could it be that patients get better with these treatments, and then reduce their fear and avoidance as a consequence of feeling better?

A: Although this is possible, reductions in fear and avoidance in the middle of treatment predicted feeling better six months after treatment, suggesting that it is more likely that reductions in fear and avoidance occur before patients improve.

Q: Did CBT and GET work in different ways?

A: Reduction in fear and avoidance of physical activity occurred with both treatments. GET also worked by improving the speed of walking – a test of how well exercise is tolerated.

Q: Most of the measures used were self-reported (participants’ response to questionnaires). Are these as relevant as objective measures such as the walking test?

A: Yes they are. In fact they are arguably more important as they are measures of the ultimate aims of treatment; for patients to feel better while getting on with their lives.

Q: Does this report tell us anything useful?

A: Yes. It will help us to design more effective treatments.