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# Explanation for symptoms and biographical repair in a clinic for persistent physical symptoms

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## Publication

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## Abstract

### Introduction

Biographical disruption describes the process by which illness impacts not just on a person's body and their participation in activities, but also on their sense of self. Biographical disruption is often followed by a process of biographical repair in which identity is reconstructed and a new normality is restored. People with persistent physical symptoms (sometimes referred to as medically unexplained symptoms) experience biographical disruption. This can be complicated by lack of explanation and the implication that if the problem is not medical, then it might be the person/psychological. We aimed to examine this tension in people attending a novel "Symptoms Clinic" for people with persistent physical symptoms.

### Methods

This study reports an embedded qualitative study in a UK based randomised controlled trial. Data were collected by audio recordings of consultations and semi-structured interviews with patients. We used theoretically informed thematic analysis with regular coding and discussion meetings of the analysis team. This analysis explores the role of intervention components in facilitating biographical repair.

### Results

The lack of acceptable explanation for persistent symptoms acted as a block to biographical repair. In the clinic, multi-layered explanations were offered and negotiated that viewed persistent symptoms as understandable entities rather than as indicators of something still hidden. These explanations allowed study participants to make sense of their symptoms and in turn opened new opportunities for self-management. The result was that participants were able to reframe their symptoms in a way that enabled them to see themselves differently. Even if symptoms had not yet improved, there was a sense of being better. This can be understood as a process of biographical repair.

### Conclusion

Explaining persistent physical symptoms enables biographical repair.

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This article reports on one component of the research award Multiple Symptoms Study 3: pragmatic trial of a community based clinic for patients with persistent (medically unexplained) physical symptoms. For more information about this research please view the award page [<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/15/136/07>]

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