SECTION 2. MEDICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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2.1 The efficacy of sertraline in anxiety and depressive disorders: pharmacological and medical-psychological aspects

Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the pharmacological effects and medical-psychological factors of sertraline in patients with anxiety-depressive or depressive disorders. The clinical dynamics of treatment during a month of psychopharmacological therapy were studied. The study combines a theoretical review of the literature on pharmacology regarding the mechanisms of action of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) with an empirical analysis of clinical cases.

The pharmacodynamic and pharmacokinetic properties of sertraline were studied, as well as the patterns of changes in psychoemotional, neurocognitive and somatic parameters during a month of therapy.

The results indicate pronounced anxiolytic and antidepressant effects of sertraline due to serotonergic transmission and neuroplastic processes. In clinical cases, there was a gradual reduction in negative affective symptoms, significant stabilisation of the emotional background, improved sleep, reduced anxiety, and significant improvement in the cognitive sphere: concentration, memory, speed of thinking, and perception.

The conclusion is that sertraline therapy is effective and safe in the context of treating anxiety and depressive disorders. The most noticeable positive changes are recorded after 3-4 weeks of therapy: comprehensive restoration of cognitive, emotional, and somatic spheres.

Introduction

Depressive and anxiety disorders are currently among the most common mental disorders of our time. These conditions pose a significant medical and psychological problem for society, affecting quality of life, well-being, and productivity. The above-mentioned disorders require a comprehensive approach to treatment, which includes the organic mechanisms of the disease and the psychological aspects of its course. One

of the most common and researched drugs in treatment is sertraline, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor that demonstrates high efficacy and safety for therapeutic purposes.

Despite the large number of publications highlighting the pharmacological properties and clinical efficacy of sertraline, the modern scientific community does not pay enough attention to integrated analysis, which combines the pharmacological properties and medical and psychological aspects of the treatment of depressive and anxiety disorders. The study of clinical cases is particularly important, as it allows us to study the dynamics of the impact of psychopharmacological therapy on the emotional, cognitive and somatic spheres of patients' lives. In this context, it is relevant to combine theoretical analysis of current pharmacological knowledge about the action of sertraline with analysis of medical and psychological changes accompanying the reduction of disorder symptoms.

The aim of this work is to study the pharmacological and medical-psychological aspects of the action of sertraline in patients with anxiety and depressive disorders, and to analyse the dynamics of changes during a month of therapy. The scientific novelty lies in the symbiosis of pharmacological theory and practical clinical observations, which allows for a clinical assessment of the effectiveness of sertraline therapy and emphasises the importance of medical and psychological support.

2.1.1 Anxiety and depressive disorder: a contemporary view

Depressive disorder is one of the most common forms of mental pathology and is now considered not as a single nosological unit, but as a heterogeneous syndrome with multiple causes and pathophysiological mechanisms. Diagnosis is based primarily on symptomatic criteria outlined in classifications such as the DSM and is not based on objective biomarkers (laboratory indicators, neuroimaging, histology), which distinguishes depression from most somatic diseases. This highlights the complexity of the disorder and the need for a multi-level neurobiological analysis.

Epidemiological studies show that about 40-50% of the risk of developing depression is due to genetic factors, but this is not a single "depression gene" but a

polygenic vulnerability in which variants of numerous genes make a relatively small contribution to the total. At the same time, non-genetic factors play a significant role: psychosocial stress, traumatic events, somatic diseases, infections, as well as random (stochastic) processes during brain development. Clinical observations show that depressive episodes often occur in the context of stress, but not all stress leads to depression, and severe traumatic events often result in other disorders (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder) rather than depression itself. [35]

One of the central areas of current research is the study of dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Some patients with depression show signs of its hyperactivation: increased cortisol secretion, impaired reverse inhibition according to the results of the dexamethasone test, changes in the production of corticotropin-releasing factor. Chronically elevated glucocorticoid levels are associated with functional and structural abnormalities in the hippocampus, which normally exerts inhibitory control over the HPA axis. In experimental models, prolonged stress is associated with a decrease in the dendritic branching of hippocampal pyramidal neurons, where neurons receive their glutamatergic synaptic inputs, resulting in reduced neurogenesis in the dentate gyrus and impaired neuroplasticity, which may potentially contribute to the development of cognitive and affective symptoms of depression. [36]

Along with the hippocampus, a number of other structures involved in the regulation of emotions, motivation, circadian rhythms, and autonomic functions are considered in the pathogenesis of depression. Neuroimaging and postmortem studies show changes in the prefrontal and cingulate cortex, amygdala, nucleus accumbens, thalamus, and hypothalamus. Disruptions in the activity of these regions are associated with phenomena such as anhedonia, decreased motivation, sleep and appetite disturbances, increased anxiety, and emotional blunting. Monoaminergic systems (serotonergic, noradrenergic, dopaminergic) also play an important role, as they widely innervate these areas and have become a classic target for antidepressant therapy, although current data indicate that the primary cause is not so much a disturbance in

monoamine levels as complex changes at the level of neuronal networks and signalling cascades. [35, 37]

Neurobiological models of depressive and anxiety disorders demonstrate a significant overlap in pathophysiological mechanisms, allowing them to be considered not as isolated categories, but as a spectrum of interrelated conditions that arise against the background of common biological dysfunctions. Preliminary analysis of depression shows that its development is associated with impaired regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, decreased neuroplasticity, dysfunction of the serotonergic, noradrenergic and dopaminergic systems, as well as changes in the activity of structures responsible for emotional control — the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, amygdala and nucleus accumbens.

These same systems play a key role in the formation of pathological anxiety. Anxiety disorder is considered a complex psychopathological condition involving interrelated biological, cognitive, and behavioural mechanisms. Unlike adaptive anxiety, which is an evolutionarily shaped response to threat, pathological anxiety is characterised by a persistent sense of danger, hypervigilance, and dysfunction of emotional regulation mechanisms.

The amygdala plays a leading role, as its sensitivity is significantly increased in anxiety disorders. Hyperactivation of the amygdala leads to rapid and excessive reactions to even neutral stimuli, which the brain begins to interpret as potentially dangerous. This hyperreactivity is accompanied by dysfunction of the prefrontal cortex, which normally provides cognitive control and inhibition of emotional responses. An important component of the pathophysiology of anxiety disorders is the hippocampus, which is responsible for encoding context and distinguishing between real and imagined threats. Chronic anxiety leads to a decrease in hippocampal volume, impaired neuroplasticity, and deterioration of contextual modulation of fear. As a result, the patient transfers the anxiety response to a wider range of situations, which contributes to the formation of unique behaviour and the maintenance of symptoms [38].

At the neurochemical level, anxiety disorder is associated with an imbalance in the serotonergic, noradrenergic, and GABAergic systems. Serotonin regulates

emotional stability, fear responses, and impulsivity, so its deficiency or impaired receptor sensitivity exacerbates anxiety. Norepinephrine is a key neurotransmitter in the stress response: its excessive release from the blue spot causes somatic manifestations of anxiety - tachycardia, tremor, hyperventilation. GABA, the main inhibitory neurotransmitter, does not work effectively enough in anxiety disorders, which creates neurophysiological prerequisites for increased excitability [39].

In medical and psychological terms, anxiety disorders include several key components:

1. Affective, which is determined by a persistent subjective feeling of tension, fear of anticipation, and emotional instability.
2. Cognitive, manifested by catastrophic thinking, selective attention to negative stimuli, overestimation of the probability of danger, and underestimation of one's own resources.
3. Behavioural, including avoidance patterns, endless checking and safety rituals.
4. Somatic, which includes vegetative symptoms, sleep disturbances, muscle tension, and changes in breathing patterns.

2.1.2 Pharmacological basis of antidepressant therapy

The first effective antidepressants — tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs), in particular amitriptyline — remained the "gold standard" for the treatment of severe, especially melancholic forms of depression for a long time. Their clinical efficacy is still considered very high, but their significant anticholinergic, sedative, and cardiotoxic effects (the so-called "quinidine-like" effect on the cardiac conduction system) limit their use, especially in patients with comorbid somatic pathology and a high risk of suicide attempts due to the danger of overdose.

The development of psychopharmacology has led to the creation of more selective monoamine reuptake inhibitors that act primarily on serotonin (5-HT) and noradrenaline (NA) and have a better tolerability profile. Today, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are considered the first-line therapy for most forms of

major depressive disorder, as well as for generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder and social anxiety. Sertraline, a representative of SSRIs, has proven efficacy in both depression and anxiety disorders due to its effect on key serotonergic links in the regulation of fear and mood. [40]

In addition to SSRIs, other selective monoamine reuptake inhibitors are also used. Roxetine is a relatively selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor, but in some meta-analyses it shows lower efficacy compared to SSRIs, which is partly attributed to tolerability and side effect profile. Bupropion, which blocks the reuptake of norepinephrine and dopamine, has a more "activating" profile (less sedation, possible improvement in motivation and energy) and may be useful in patients with severe anhedonia, anhedonia, and excessive daytime sleepiness. [41]

Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), such as venlafaxine and duloxetine, constitute a separate group. Clinical guidelines often recommend switching to SNRI in cases of insufficient response to SSRI, especially in severe depression or depression with a pronounced anxiety component, somatic symptoms, and chronic pain. Although in theory these drugs should effectively block the reuptake of both serotonin and noradrenaline, in practice the noradrenergic component is clearly evident mainly at higher doses, which is important to consider when titrating.

In recent years, so-called "multimodal" antidepressants have appeared, which combine serotonin reuptake inhibition with modulation of various subtypes of 5-HT receptors. For example, vilazodone combines serotonin transporter blockade with partial agonism of 5-HT1A receptors, while vortioxetine affects several receptors simultaneously (5-HT1A, 5-HT1B, 5-HT1D, 5-HT3, 5-HT7), which is potentially linked to its positive effect on the cognitive symptoms of depression. Preliminary data indicate that such drugs may reduce sexual side effects and negative cognitive changes, but their advantages over classic SSRIs need further confirmation. [40, 41]

Antidepressants that do not act by directly blocking the reuptake of serotonin or noradrenaline are used in parallel, but ultimately also increase their availability. Mirtazapine blocks α2-adrenoreceptors on neurons, leading to increased norepinephrine release, and is also an antagonist of 5-HT2A/5-HT2C receptors, which

may indirectly enhance the release of norepinephrine and dopamine in cortical areas. This drug is often used in patients with depression and severe anxiety, sleep disturbances and decreased appetite, as it has sedative and anxiolytic potential. Agomelatine, as a melatonin receptor agonist with antagonism to 5-HT2C receptors, is positioned as a means of normalising circadian rhythms and improving sleep, but the question of actual 5-HT2C blockade at clinically achievable doses remains controversial.

Despite differences in molecular targets, all antidepressants registered to date, including those used for anxiety disorders, are considered to be based on increasing the availability of serotonin and/or noradrenaline in the synaptic cleft, at least in the early stages of treatment. This applies to both first-line drugs (SSRIs, SNRIs) and drugs used for resistant depression or severe anxiety-depression combinations.

2.1.3 Pharmacological mechanism of action of sertraline in anxiety and depressive disorders

Sertraline is one of the most studied selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and is a first-line drug for the treatment of major depressive disorder (MDD) and anxiety disorders. Its therapeutic effect is based on a multi-level influence on serotonergic neuronal networks, neuroplasticity systems and cognitive-affective mechanisms, which causes both antidepressant and anxiolytic effects. In the current literature, sertraline is considered to be the drug with the most balanced combination of efficacy and tolerability among SSRIs, as confirmed by large meta-analyses, including the Cochrane Review (Cipriani et al., 2010) [42].

At the molecular level, the main target of sertraline is the serotonin transporter (SERT), the blockade of which prevents the reuptake of 5-hydroxytryptamine into the presynaptic terminal. This leads to the accumulation of serotonin in the synaptic cleft and enhanced serotonergic transmission in the brain regions responsible for mood, anxiety, and stress regulation: the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, anterior cingulate cortex, and amygdala. The above-mentioned analytical work states that sertraline has one of the highest selectivity indices for SERT among SSRIs, which reduces the risk

of undesirable pharmacodynamic interactions and ensures a "pure" effect on serotonergic networks. In addition, sertraline has a weak inhibitory effect on the dopamine transporter (DAT) and has an affinity for α1-receptors, which may contribute to the improvement of anhedonia, motivational characteristics, and stress modulation, as well as explain its effectiveness in anxiety disorders [42].

Increased serotonin levels are only the initial link in the pharmacological effect. The therapeutic effect of SSRIs develops gradually over several weeks, which is associated with the activation of neuroplasticity signalling cascades. Chronic use of sertraline stimulates the expression of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), activation of the TrkB receptor, enhancement of cAMP/PKA signalling pathways, Ca-dependent mechanisms and ERK, and stimulates the mTORC1 pathway responsible for the synthesis of synaptic proteins. These changes contribute to the restoration of synaptic density and flexibility of neuronal networks in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, which undergo atrophy under the influence of chronic stress and depression. Thus, the antidepressant effect of sertraline is associated not only with changes in neurotransmitter concentrations, but also with the restoration of the structural and functional integrity of the networks that regulate mood and emotions [42].

A separate aspect of the pharmacodynamics of sertraline is its early effect on cognitive-affective processes, in particular on emotional perception. Evidence shows that already in the first days of treatment, SSRIs correct the negative affective bias characteristic of depression and anxiety disorders: the tendency to interpret emotional signals as threatening decreases, amygdala reactivity normalises, and the activity of prefrontal regulatory areas increases. This creates the basis for further clinical improvements, although the subjective effect itself develops more slowly. The mechanism of affective bias correction explains the wide range of indications for sertraline, from depression to panic disorder, GAD, social anxiety, OCD, and PTSD.

2.1.4 Medical and psychological aspects of the action of sertraline

The medical and psychological mechanisms of sertraline's action encompass a complex of neuropsychological, cognitive, and emotional changes that appear earlier

than the clinical reduction of symptoms and largely determine the patient's therapeutic trajectory. Current models of antidepressant action suggest that SSRIs, including sertraline, not only normalise serotonergic transmission, but also gradually modify patterns of emotional information processing, reducing negative cognitive selectivity and increasing sensitivity to positive stimuli [43, 44].

Patients with depressive disorder consistently show a negative attentional bias—a tendency to notice, hold their gaze on, and return to negative stimuli more often, such as threatening or sad faces, emotionally charged words, or disturbing scenes. Eye-tracking studies show that before treatment, patients in the first depressive phase fixate on negative images for significantly longer and avoid positive ones, forming a consistently distorted emotional processing pattern. After eight weeks of sertraline therapy, this pattern changes significantly: patients reduce the number of fixations on negative stimuli and increase their attention to positive emotional scenes. In other words, the drug weakens psychological vulnerability to negative content and significantly increases the availability of positive emotional signals in processing [43]. These data are consistent with the cognitive-neuropsychological model, according to which antidepressants first change the style of information processing and only then change mood. Thus, sertraline affects the "gateway" of the emotional system, gradually straightening the distorted perception pattern that supports depressive symptoms.

At the level of emotional memory, the effects of sertraline were more indirect. A large randomised study showed that in the first weeks of treatment, patients did not show significant differences in the number of positive or negative biases they could recall. At the same time, the authors emphasise that the lack of effect on voluntary recall does not contradict the general model of antidepressant action. Changes in the conscious reproduction of emotional information are a late cognitive level, while sertraline primarily changes early automatic reactions that are not always immediately reflected in conscious memory. Clinical practice confirms this sequence: mood and memory change later, while emotional reactivity and information processing style change much earlier [44].

In parallel with this, sertraline affects threat processing by modulating the interaction between the amygdala and structures that regulate attention and emotional evaluation. Studies show that after a course of therapy, hypersensitivity to threatening faces and scenes, which is characteristic of both depressed and anxious patients, decreases. At the same time, the ability to recognise positive social signals increases, which contributes to the restoration of emotional resonance and a reduction in social detachment. This psycho-emotional "balancing" is considered one of the key psychological mechanisms by which the drug reduces anxiety, reduces catastrophising, and increases stress resistance and resilience [43, 45].

In summary, the medical and psychological effect of sertraline can be described as the creation of a new emotional background, within which the patient ceases to "fixate" on the negative, becomes less sensitive to threatening signals, and for the first time has the opportunity to reprocess positive experiences without automatically distorting them. Thus, the pharmacological action of the drug opens a "window of therapeutic plasticity": a period when cognitive patterns become more flexible and psychotherapy becomes significantly more effective. In many clinical cases, it is this mechanism that explains why the patient begins to work more productively, engages in social interactions more quickly, and gradually regains a sense of emotional security, even if subjective "relief" has not yet fully formed.

Results of the study

The study involved 24 patients with a pre-determined diagnosis of depressive and anxiety-depressive disorder. The clinical dynamics were studied at two time points: at the beginning of treatment and after four weeks of sertraline administration. An additional comparison of monthly results allowed us to record the early pharmacodynamic and medical-psychological effects characteristic of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.

All 24 patients included in the study obtained valid repeat scores on the HADS, PHQ-9, GAD-7, and WHO-5 scales, which allowed not only to quantitatively record the dynamics of symptoms, but also to verify the consistency and reliability of changes

associated with therapy. Primary and follow-up data were collected using the same standardised protocol, reducing the risk of methodological error.

The PHQ-9 scale allowed us to quantitatively determine the degree of depressive symptoms according to the DSM diagnostic criteria, including domains such as anhedonia, fatigue, cognitive slowing, and sleep disturbances. The GAD-7 provided an assessment of generalised anxiety, focusing on muscle and mental tension, unconscious anticipation of danger, concentration disorders, and somatic manifestations. The HADS scale, which separates anxiety and depression subcomponents, was useful for distinguishing symptoms caused by affective pathology itself from somatic manifestations related to health status. Finally, the WHO-5 allowed us to measure the subjective level of psychological well-being, i.e. the quality of life that is not reduced to the presence or absence of symptoms, but reflects the overall emotional tone, inner energy, motivation and sense of life resources.

After one month of treatment, most patients showed clear positive dynamics.

First of all, on the HADS scale, namely the D scale "Depression," there was a clear shift in the distribution from average depressive values (11–16 points before therapy, which was the most represented category) to low and subclinical values (1–9 points after therapy). The average reduction in the severity of depressive symptoms was 42–50%, which is particularly noticeable in the disappearance of the group of patients with scores above 15 points and the appearance of a significant proportion of individuals in the range of minimal manifestations. (Fig. 1)

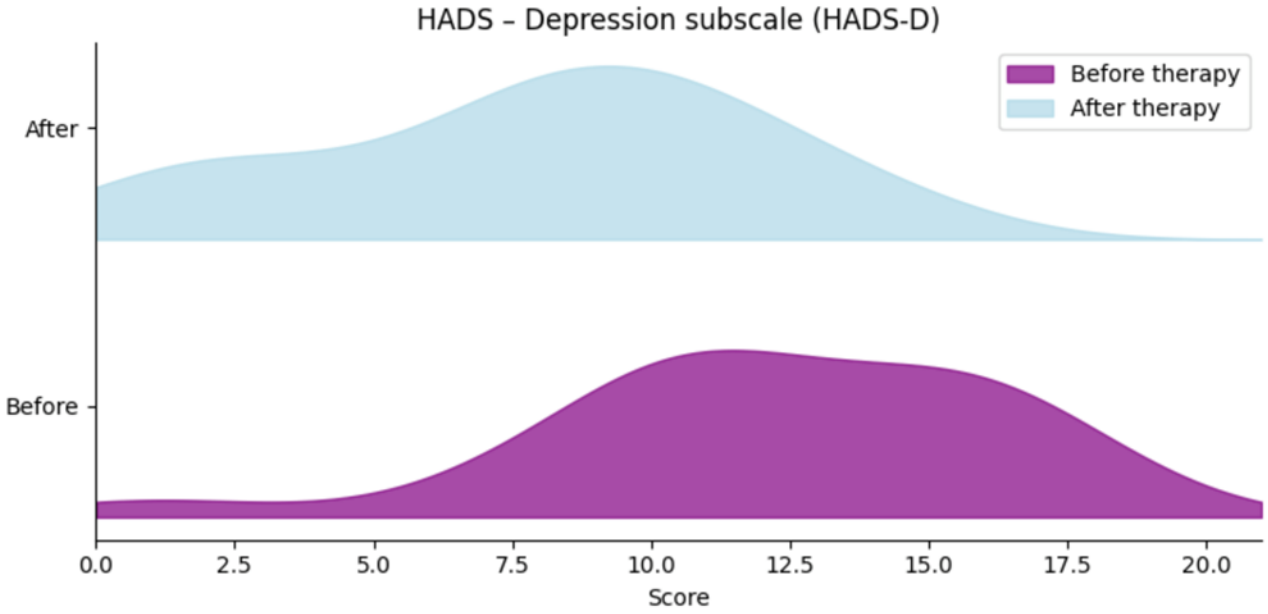

Figure 1. Histogram [created by the authors]

Similarly, the HADS A "Anxiety" subscale showed a 45–55% reduction in symptoms: if before the start of therapy the peak values were 10–14 points, and in some cases up to 17 points, then after treatment most of the scores were recorded in the mild anxiety zone (4–9 points). The group with the highest baseline score of 12 points (25% of the sample) disappeared completely. (Fig. 2)

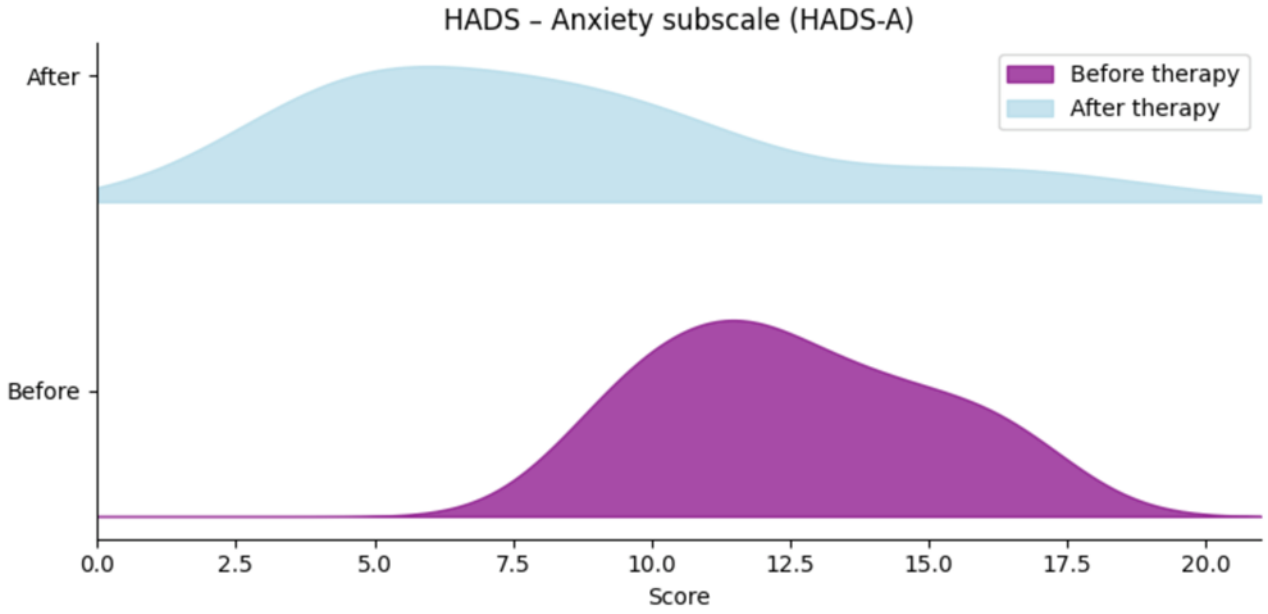

Figure 2. Histogram [created by the authors]

A comparison of PHQ-9 scores confirms a similar trend. Before therapy, scores of 12–19 points (moderate and moderately severe depressive episode) dominated, while after one month, most patients moved into the 3–8 point range. The overall reduction in PHQ-9 scores was 40–60%, accompanied by a complete absence of scores in the high severity category (>19 points after therapy). (Fig. 3)

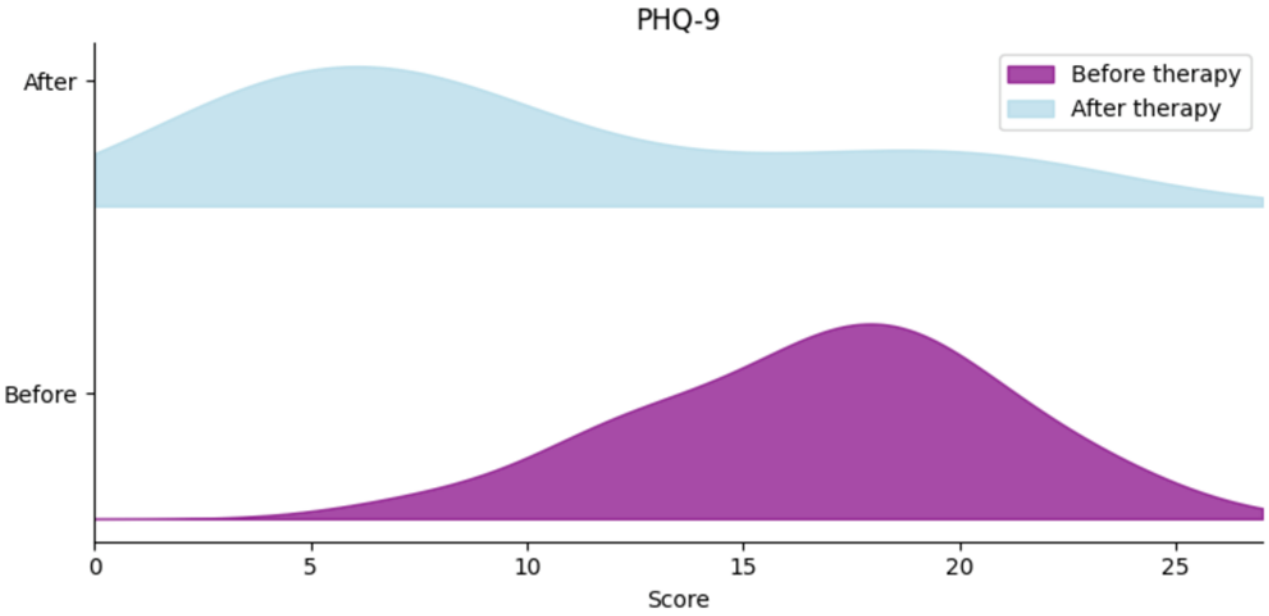

Figure 3. Histogram [created by the authors]

The reduction in generalised anxiety according to GAD-7 was even more pronounced. Before treatment, the largest group was patients with 11 points (30%), and values above 10 points accounted for the majority of the sample. After therapy, the distribution shifted to 3–7 points, and the intensity of anxiety decreased by an average of 50–65%. Values above 10 points were observed only in isolated cases (≤10% of respondents). (Fig. 4)

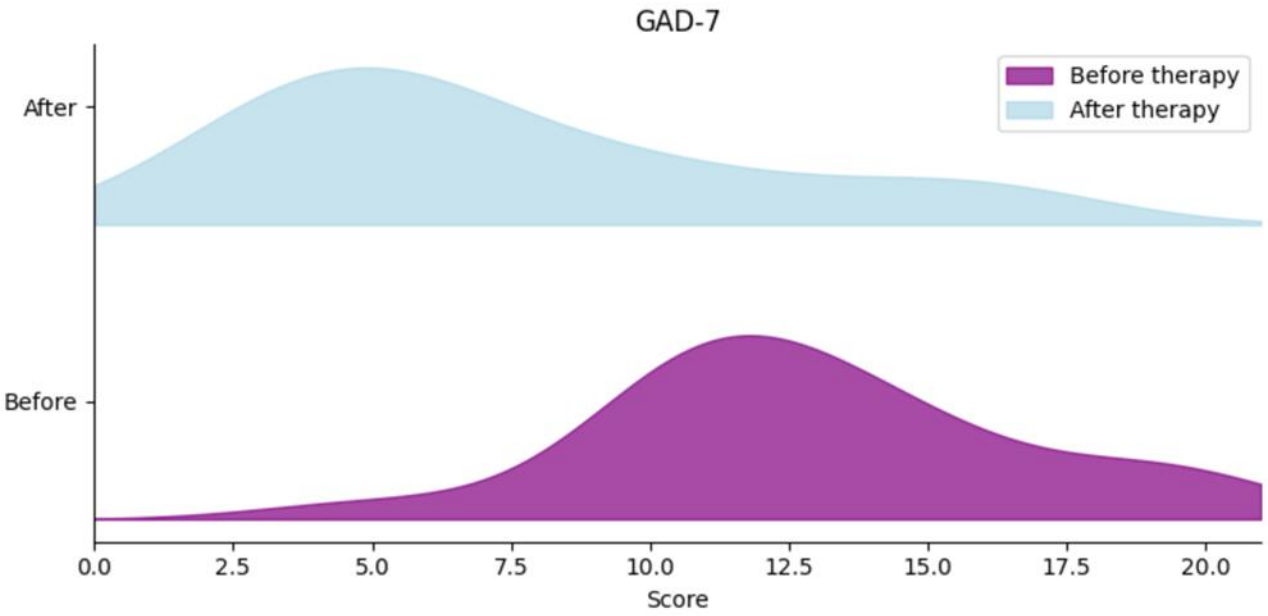

Figure 4. Histogram [created by the authors]

The transformation of the subjective sense of well-being, as recorded by the WHO-5 index, was particularly striking. While the initial peak value was 16 points (30% of the sample), after therapy, values of 20–60 points and even higher appeared. The overall improvement is estimated at +60–120%, meaning that the level of well-being in many patients has actually doubled. Thus, sertraline demonstrates not only a reduction in symptoms, but also a positive effect on overall psychological tone and vitality. (Fig. 5)

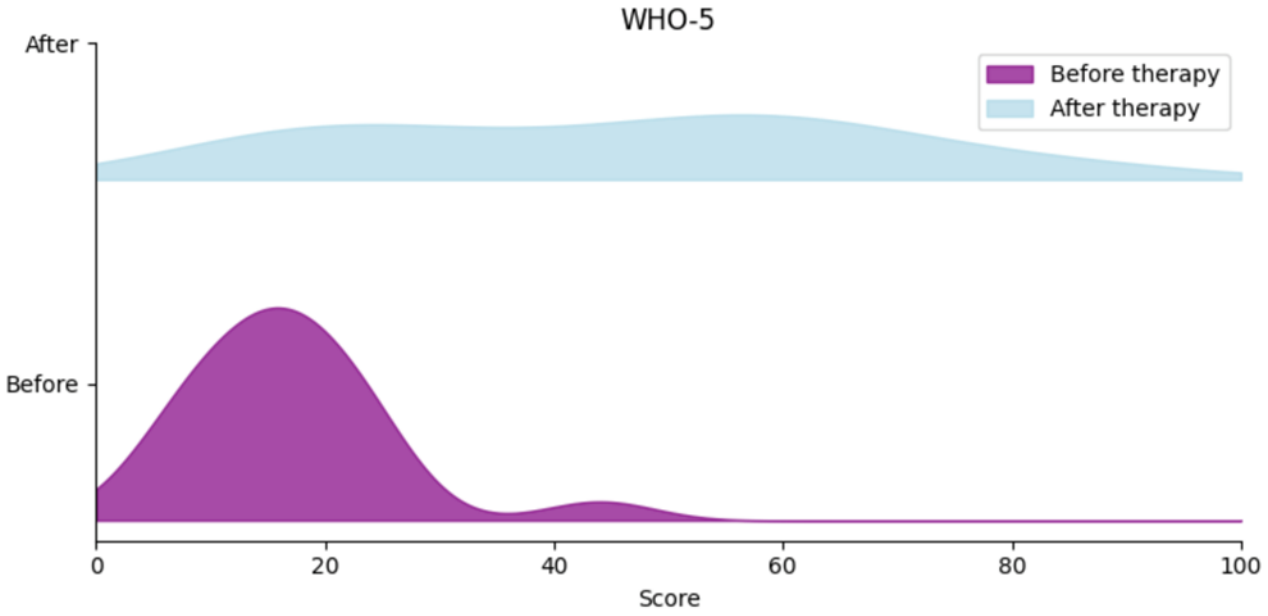

Figure 5. Histogram [created by the authors]

Data on symptoms prior to therapy confirm that the empirical sample was characterised by a high frequency of anxiety, cognitive and psychophysiological manifestations: 90% of patients reported obsessive anxious thoughts, 80% reported severe sleep disturbances, 65% reported emotional lability, 55% reported social anxiety, 40% reported decreased cognitive performance, 30% reported panic attacks, and 15% reported suicidal thoughts or hyperphagia. After the course of therapy, the frequency of all these symptoms decreased by approximately 50–70%, which corresponds to the overall dynamics of the scales and confirms that the clinical response is multilevel.

A characteristic feature of the data obtained is that the somatic and physiological components of the disorders (vegetative manifestations of anxiety, tension, sleep disturbances) were reduced more quickly than the psychological and cognitive ones. This is most likely due to the fact that serotonergic modulation, which is restored during the first 7–14 days of therapy, directly affects vegetative tone, amygdala hyperreactivity, and the physical component of emotional arousal. In contrast, psychological factors — persistent cognitive patterns, rumination, catastrophising, emotional interpretation of the environment — require much longer neuroplastic restructuring (4–8 weeks or more), which is consistent with current models of BDNF-dependent plasticity and cognitive recovery.

That is why pharmacotherapy is most effective in a comprehensive approach, where medication stabilisation is combined with psychotherapeutic interventions. Among them, the following are particularly effective cognitive-behavioural therapy, which corrects dysfunctional beliefs and automatic thoughts; psychocorrectional approaches aimed at restoring self-regulation and structuring emotional experience; as well as mindfulness-oriented methods capable of reducing neural reactivity, enhancing stress tolerance, and forming long-term self-regulation skills. These results correlate with the conclusions obtained in our previous studies on psychocorrectional and mindfulness interventions, which showed that strengthening internal regulatory mechanisms significantly enhances the effect of pharmacotherapy and promotes sustained remission [46, 47].

The results obtained give reason to believe that after a month of therapy, sertraline demonstrates a pronounced and clinically significant combined effect: pharmacological (through its effect on serotonergic transmission), medical-psychological (through early changes in emotional processing), and stabilising (through the restoration of sleep, cognitive regulation, and subjective well-being). This convergence indicates the effectiveness of the drug in both anxiety and depression contexts at an early stage of treatment.

Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrate that sertraline is a highly effective treatment for depressive and anxiety disorders already in the early stages of therapy, providing a systemic effect on the affective, cognitive, and somatic components of the psychopathological state. A comprehensive analysis of clinical cases, together with the dynamics of indicators on the HADS, PHQ-9, GAD-7 and WHO-5 scales, confirms that the drug affects not only the reduction of symptoms, but also fundamental medical and psychological processes—emotional processing, reactive anxiety, rumination, cognitive flexibility, and subjective well-being.

In most patients, positive effects were observed within the first month of treatment: a reduction in depressive and anxiety symptoms, a decrease in somatic manifestations of anxiety, normalisation of sleep, and a reduction in catastrophic thinking. The PHQ-9 and GAD-7 scores showed an average reduction in symptoms of 25-30%, while the HADS data confirmed an improvement in both the depressive and anxiety components of the emotional state. The increase in WHO-5 scores indicated the formation of a subjective sense of inner support and psychological recovery, which is a key criterion for real remission.

The results confirm the advisability of using sertraline as a first-line drug for depressive and anxiety disorders, especially given its early medical and psychological effect, good tolerability, and stability of clinical response. The convergence between psychological scales and clinical observations indicates the reliability and validity of the results, which strengthens the evidence base for the effectiveness of sertraline in the treatment of emotional disorders.

A final important conclusion is that the results obtained outline the prospect for further research, namely a more in-depth analysis of the medical and psychological mechanisms of sertraline's action, which go beyond a purely pharmacological approach. Such an expanded medical and psychological perspective will allow for a deeper understanding of how antidepressants transform the human psyche — not only by reducing symptoms, but also by modifying thinking patterns, emotional regulation, and adaptive abilities.