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The brief negative symptom scale (BNSS): Sensitivity to treatment effects

Brian Kirkpatrick^{a,*}, Jay B. Saoud^b, Gregory P. Strauss^c, Anthony O. Ahmed^d, Kazunori Tatsumi^e, Mark Opler^e, Remy Luthringer^f, Michael Davidson^f

^a University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine, Reno, NV, USA

^b PPRS Research, Inc., Groton, MA, USA

^c Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

^d Department of Psychiatry, Weill Cornell School of Medicine, USA

^e ProPhase LLC, New York City, New York, USA

^f Minerva Neurosciences, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

The Brief Negative Symptom Scale (BNSS) grew out of a recommendation by the NIMH-sponsored Consensus Development Conference on Negative Symptoms that a scale based on contemporary concepts be developed. We assessed sensitivity to change of the BNSS in a trial of MIN-101, which showed efficacy for negative symptoms (PANSS pentagonal model) at daily doses of 32 and 64 mg/day. Using mixed-effects model for repeated measures, we examined change in BNSS total score and in the BNSS factors of anhedonia/avolition/asociality (AAA), and expressivity (EXP). Compared to placebo, the 64 mg group ($N = 83$) showed a significant decrease in BNSS total score (effect size d [ES] 0.56, $p < 0.01$) and both factor scores (AAA ES = 0.48, EXP ES = 0.46, $p < 0.02$ for both). Patients in the trial had minimal depression and positive symptom scores; covarying for disorganization, positive symptoms, or anxiety/depression did not cause a meaningful change in the significance of the BNSS total or factor scores in this group. The 32 mg group ($N = 78$) did not differ significantly from placebo ($N = 83$) on BNSS total score (ES = 0.33, $p < 0.09$), AAA (ES = 0.25, $p < 0.20$) or EXP (ES = 0.30, $p < 0.12$) scores. These results demonstrate the BNSS is sensitive to change.

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1. Introduction

The NIMH Consensus Development Conference on Negative Symptoms recommended that a negative symptom scale be developed that would embody recent changes in the concept of negative symptoms (Kirkpatrick et al. 2006). In response to that recommendation, the Brief Negative Symptom Scale (BNSS), which was designed for ease of use in clinical trials, was developed and tested. Psychometric studies of the BNSS have shown excellent reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity in English and in translation (Kirkpatrick et al. 2011; Strauss et al. 2012b; Mané et al. 2014; Mucci et al. 2015; Polat Nazli et al., 2016; Bischof et al. 2016; Yao et al. 2014; Strauss and Gold 2016; Strauss et al. 2016a). Translations and back translations exist in Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Chinese (simplified and traditional script), German, Russian, Dutch, Danish, Polish, Norwegian, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese versions (Bischof et al. 2016; Choi et al. 2016; Mucci et al. 2015; Polat Nazli et al., 2016; Yao et al. 2014; and personal communications).

The BNSS consists of 13 items organized into six subscales (Table 1). Five of these subscales reflect the domains recognized as part of the construct of negative symptoms: anhedonia, avolition, asociality, blunted affect, and alogia. The Consensus Conference participants left open the possibility that other domains belong in this construct, and the BNSS contains an additional item, Lack of Normal Distress. A conceptually similar item, Diminished Emotional Range, is part of the Schedule for the Deficit Syndrome (SDS; Kirkpatrick et al. 1989). Psychometric studies of the BNSS and the SDS (Bischof et al. 2016; Kimhy et al. 2006; Kirkpatrick et al. 2011; Mané et al. 2014; Mucci et al. 2015; Nakaya and Ohmori 2008; Polat Nazli et al., 2016; Strauss et al. 2012b) have suggested that this item's content also belongs in the construct of negative symptoms.

The BNSS has a two-factor structure in English and in translation (Kirkpatrick et al. 2011; Strauss et al. 2012a; Mucci et al. 2015; Yao et al., 2014; Polat Nazli et al., 2016; Bischof et al. 2016) that is very similar to the factor structure of the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms (Blanchard and Cohen 2006) and the Clinical Assessment Interview for Negative Symptoms (Blanchard et al. 2017). The two BNSS factors consist of items from 1) the anhedonia, avolition, and asociality (AAA) subscales, and 2) the blunted affect and alogia subscales (expressivity; EXP). Although measures such as Cronbach's alpha suggest the

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, 5190 Neil Road, Suite 215, Reno, NV, USA.

E-mail address: bkirkpatrick@unr.edu (B. Kirkpatrick).

Table 1
Items and subscales in the brief negative symptom scale.

Subscale	Item	AAA factor	EXP Factor
Anhedonia	Intensity of pleasure	✓	
	Frequency of pleasurable activities	✓	
	Intensity of expected pleasure	✓	
Lack of normal distress	Lack of normal distress ^a		
Asociality	Asociality: behavior	✓	
	Asociality: Internal experience	✓	
Avolition	Avolition: behavior	✓	
	Avolition: internal experience	✓	
Blunted affect	Facial expression		✓
	Vocal expression		✓
	Expressive gestures		✓
Alogia	Quantity of speech		✓
	Spontaneous elaboration		✓

AAA: Anhedonia/avolition/asociality; EXP: Expressivity.

^a Lack of normal distress usually does not load strongly onto either factor. See text for references.

BNSS Lack of Normal Distress item belongs in the construct of negative symptoms (Strauss et al. 2012a), it does not load as strongly on either factor as do the other BNSS items.

The BNSS has shown sensitivity to change in a psychosocial treatment trial (Choi et al. 2016), variation in multi-locus genetic profile scores reflecting elevated subcortical dopaminergic signaling capacity (Eisenstein et al. 2017), and factor-specific correlations with regional brain activation (Kirschner et al. 2016) and real-world function (Galderisi et al. 2014). The study of real world function demonstrated the practicality of use of the BNSS in large multicenter studies. The BNSS has also shown sensitivity to groups differences in reward processing, which is currently the most influential theoretical model for negative symptoms, with the AAA factor having a specific relationship to reward (Barch et al. 2014; Culbreth et al. 2016; Strauss et al. 2016b).

MIN-101 (a proprietary drug of Minerva Neurosciences, Inc.) is an antagonist of 5HT_{2A} and sigma₂ receptors (Mestre et al. 2013; Köster et al. 2014; Davidson et al., in press). In a 12-week, double blind phase 2b trial, two doses of MIN-101 were found to be superior to placebo as monotherapy for negative symptoms (Davidson et al., 2017) as measured by the negative factor score of the pentagonal structure model of the PANSS (White et al. 1997). The results of the trial suggest the change in negative symptoms were not “pseudospecific,” i.e. secondary to changes in positive psychotic symptoms or depression, as there was no significant change in positive symptoms, and the negative symptom effect remained significant after covarying for change in depression scores (and see below).

The BNSS was a secondary outcome measure in the MI-101 phase 2b trial. As the BNSS has not previously been assessed in a pharmaceutical trial, we examined in detail its performance in that trial.

2. Materials and methods

In brief, this was an international, multicenter, double-blind study with three parallel arms: MIN-101 at a daily oral dose of either 32 mg (N = 78) or 64 mg (N = 83), and placebo (N = 83; study registered as EudraCT Number: 2014-004878-42). Both MIN-101 and placebo were given as monotherapy, and patients were withdrawn from any antipsychotic medication prior to receiving study treatment. For details of the protocol and detailed results, see Davidson et al. (in press).

2.1. Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Two hundred forty-four patients between the ages of 18 and 60 entered the trial. Entry criteria included 1) a DSM-5 diagnosis of schizophrenia, 2) clinically stable and exhibiting negative symptoms for 3 months prior to entering the study, as determined by their treating psychiatrist, and 3) on the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale, a

total score ≥ 20 on the PANSS negative syndrome subscale (items N1–N7), and scores < 4 on the PANSS excitement, hyperactivity, hostility, suspiciousness, uncooperativeness, and poor impulse control items. Exclusions were a diagnosis of another mental disorder, a significant risk of suicide, a positive urine test for illicit drugs, a history of substance abuse, or an unstable medical disorder. There were also exclusion criteria related to QT values, and for poor and intermediate metabolizers for P450 CYP2D6 (Davidson et al., in press).

2.2. Study design

Eligible patients were withdrawn from depot antipsychotics, if any, for ≥ 1 month. All patients were then hospitalized and withdrawn from all psychotropic drugs for ≥ 5 days prior to randomization to oral MIN-101 32 mg/day, 64 mg/day, or placebo, in a 1:1:1 ratio. They remained hospitalized for at least 36 h after randomization, longer at the discretion of the investigator if clinically indicated.

Study treatment lasted for 12 weeks. No psychotropic medications were allowed during the trial, other than 1) oral lorazepam, oral zolpidem, or injectable sodium amytal for insomnia or agitation, or 2) anticholinergic medications for any extrapyramidal symptoms that emerged during the study. After the 12 weeks of double blind treatment, there was a 24-week open continuation phase. Data shown here are from the double-blind phase only. The primary outcome measure was the negative factor score of the PANSS from the pentagonal structure model (N1–N4, G5–G8 G13,14; White et al. 1997).

2.3. BNSS factors

As the BNSS item 4, Lack of Normal Distress, has not loaded as strongly on either the AAA or EXP factor as do other items, it was not included in either of the factor scores in the current analyses. The AAA score was therefore defined for the present analyses as the sum of the scores for items 1–3 and 5–8 (range: 0–42), and the EXP score was defined as the sum of the scores for items 9–13 (range 0–30).

2.4. Analyses

We present data related to the BNSS or its performance; details on other measures can be found in Davidson et al. (2017).

Using Mixed-Effect Model Repeated Measure (MMRM) analysis, we examined changes in BNSS total score and the AAA and EXP factors in the three treatment arms. We also examined whether the effect of MIN-101 was specific to negative symptoms or could be attributed to changes in positive symptoms and/or depression anxiety, using MMRM covarying for the positive, disorganization, and depression factors.

Using data from the endpoint ratings, confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine whether the raters separated the two factors found in previous studies. We examined the relative fits of two-factor and one-factor models of the BNSS, omitting the lack of normal distress item, using weighted least squares and maximum likelihood as methods of estimation. The comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), the root-mean-square-error-of-approximation (RMSEA), and information criteria (Akaike [AIC], Bayesian [BIC], and sample size adjusted BIC) were used to evaluate the relative fit of the two models, and of a ‘m,v null model, in which items are assumed to have zero covariance.

3. Results

Consistent with the recommendation of the Consensus Development Conference on Negative Symptoms on appropriate selection criteria for inclusion in negative symptom treatment trials (Kirkpatrick et al. 2006), patients entering the study had substantial negative symptoms but minimal positive and depressive symptoms.

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