BOND UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF RESEARCH

Psychosocial stressors, cognitions and emotions, in people diagnosed with scleroderma

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Abstract of Thesis:

Biopsychosocial research suggests that exposure to early life stressors and prolonged cognitive and emotional responses are related to adverse health outcomes. Scleroderma (systemic sclerosis) is a chronic and often progressive autoimmune disease affecting approximately 1 in 4,000 in the population. Scleroderma can cause inflammation and fibrosis, impede normal functioning of the skin, joints, blood vessels, lungs and internal organs. Much of the research on scleroderma has found there are negative physical, psychological and social implications for the person diagnosed with this disease.

Stress has been associated with the onset of scleroderma, however evidence as to the specific stressors responsible for this condition are yet to be determined. No study the author is aware of has explored the underlying cognitions and emotions associated with early stressful events and psychological aspects associated with scleroderma. The current study will investigate factors such as early experiences of warmth and safety, attachment, stressful events in childhood, shame, self criticism, social comparison and self compassion as factors that may underlie depression, anxiety, stress, and stages, clusters and severity of scleroderma.

A scleroderma symptom inventory (SSI) will be developed to investigate clusters and stages of scleroderma symptoms and associated psychological factors. A pilot study will be conducted to assess cognitive behavioural therapy with mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy with compassionate mind training to identify an effective treatment for the reduction of psychological and physical symptoms associated with scleroderma.