

Exposure Therapy: Breaking Free from Your Deepest Fears

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Exposure therapy is a technique in behavior therapy intended to treat anxiety disorders and involves the exposure to the feared object or context without any danger in order to overcome their anxiety. Procedurally it is similar to the fear extinction paradigm in rodent work. Numerous studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety disorders such as PTSD and specific phobias.

Exposure-based therapy may be effective in preventing the progression from acute stress disorder to post-traumatic stress disorder, according to a report in the June 2008 issue of Archives of General Psychiatry.

It is also very closely related to exposure and response prevention, a method widely used for the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Techniques

Exposure therapy is based on the principles of respondent conditioning often termed Pavlovian extinction. Exposure therapy identifies the cognitions, emotions and physiological arousal that accompany a fear-inducing stimulus, and attempts to break the pattern of escape that strengthens the fear response through measured exposure to progressively stronger stimuli until habituation is reached. The technique involves the creation of a program of steadily escalating steps or challenges (a Method of Factors), which can be explicit or implicit, that work towards a final goal representing a "non-phobic" behavior. The patient then voluntarily moves through the steps with a means of terminating each step which is under voluntary control.

While therapeutic exposure has a strong evidence base, many clinicians are uncomfortable performing the technique because they do not understand it or are not confident in their own ability to utilize it. This has prevented many who could benefit from this form of therapy from receiving it.

Exposure and flooding differ in that flooding starts at the most extreme item in a fear hierarchy, while exposure does not.

Organizations

Exposure therapy is a behavior therapy technique. Many organizations exist for behavior therapists around the world. The World Association for Behavior Analysis offers a certification in behavior therapy . This certification allows for the demonstration of knowledge regarding exposure therapy.