

# Flooding: Confront Your Deepest Fears to Find Freedom

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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Flooding is a form of behavior therapy and based on the principles of respondent conditioning. It is sometimes referred to as exposure therapy or prolonged exposure therapy. As a psychotherapeutic technique, it is used to treat phobia and anxiety disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder. It works by exposing the patient to their painful memories, with the goal of reintegrating their repressed emotions with their current awareness. Flooding was invented by psychologist Thomas Stampfl in 1967. It still is used in behavior therapy today.

Flooding is a psychotherapeutic method for overcoming phobias. This is a faster, yet less efficient and more traumatic, method of ridding fears when compared with systematic desensitization. In order to demonstrate the irrationality of the fear, a psychologist would put a person in a situation where they would face their phobia at its worst. Under controlled conditions and using psychologically-proved relaxation techniques the subject attempts to replace their fear with relaxation. The experience can often be traumatic for a person, but may be necessary if the phobia is causing them problems. The advantage to flooding is that it is quick and usually effective. There is however, spontaneous recovery of a fear that may occur. This can be made less likely with systematic desensitization; another form of a classical condition procedure for the elimination of phobias.

### **How flooding works**

"Flooding" is an effective form of treatment for phobias amongst other psychopathologies. It works on the principles of classical conditioning or respondent conditioning--a form of Pavlov's classical conditioning--where patients change their behaviors to avoid negative stimuli. According to Pavlov, we learn through associations, so if we have a phobia it is because we associate the feared object or stimulus with something negative.

Flooding uses a technique based on Pavlov's classical conditioning that uses exposure. There are different forms of exposure such as imaginal exposure, virtual reality exposure, and in vivo exposure. While systematic desensitization may use these other types of exposure, flooding uses in vivo exposure, actual exposure to the feared stimulus. A patient is placed in a room with the stimulus that provoked the original trauma under the controlled conditions of the psychiatrists. The psychiatrist there tries to help the patient to use relaxation techniques in order to calm themselves. Relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation are common in these kinds of classical conditioning procedures. As the adrenaline and fear response has a time limit theoretically a person will eventually have to calm down and realize that there is nothing to be afraid of. Flooding can be done through the use of virtual reality and is fairly effective.

Psychiatrist Joseph Wolpe (1973) carried out an experiment which demonstrated flooding. He took a girl who was scared of cars, locked her in a car and drove her around for hours. Initially the girl was hysterical but she eventually calmed down when she realized that her situation was safe.

From then on she associated a sense of ease with cars.

Flooding therapy is not for every individual, and the therapist will discuss with the patient the levels of anxiety they are prepared to endure during the session. It may also be true that exposure is not for every therapist and therapists seem to shy away from use of the technique.

### **Why flooding is necessary**

Phobias by definition are irrational fears, and these phobias can get in the way of everyday life. For example, a person with a phobia of cars would have a hard time crossing the street or even walking around town. For some reason this person has developed the belief that all cars are dangerous and need to be avoided. Often, a person who has developed a phobia of a particular thing or situation will go to extreme lengths to avoid that situation. As long as they avoid exposure to the thing that they fear, they have no way of knowing that it can't hurt them.

### **Organizations**

Flooding 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, which includes questions on flooding and exposure therapy.