

LICBT: Exposure & Habituation

Probable Diagnosis: Agoraphobia, Specific Phobia

Key Concepts: Exposure, Habituation

Intervention Rationale:

- Maintenance Cycle:** Thinking about or encountering our feared stimulus provokes an autonomic 'Fight or Flight' reaction: our body floods with stress hormones and we feel (real) fear. We also think thoughts about how scary, hard or distressing encountering our feared stimulus is, and how much we want to avoid this. All our thoughts and feelings make us want to avoid or get away (or use safety behaviours) which is what we tend to do. This is very effective in giving us relief from our symptoms, which means we keep repeating these behaviours (negative reinforcement). However, escaping, avoiding or using safety behaviours both reinforces the erroneous idea that our feared stimulus is dangerous and deprives us of the opportunity to find out that it isn't. As a result, every time we encounter or think about the stimulus again, we feel afraid again and escape/avoid/use safety behaviours in order to cope.
- How E&H helps:** Exposure and Habituation breaks this cycle by gradually bringing us into planned contact with our feared stimulus (exposure) so that our body and brain get to learn it is not in fact dangerous (habituation). As we repeat this exposure we gradually get more and more learning that our feared stimulus isn't dangerous, meaning we produce less and less of an autonomic fear response each time and therefore gradually experience less and less fear, making it progressively easier to be in the situation. We know from research what hinders and promotes habituation, so there are a set of Exposure & Habituation 'rules' to help us get the greatest effect from our exposure exercises.

Associated Workbook: Facing your Fears

http://cedar.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/schoolofpsychology/cedar/documents/liiapt/Facing_your_Fears.pdf

Intervention stages, worksheets, hows & whys	
Step 1: Learn & understand the four conditions	Face your Fears workbook pages 12 & 13
How <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through discussion in our sessions, supported by reading in the workbook 	Why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> So that we understand how to plan an effective hierarchy and undertake Exposure exercises in the most effective way So that we know how to adjust exposure & habituation exercises when they don't go according to expectation
Graded - how <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We should gradually expose ourselves to our feared stimulus through a hierarchy of activities that bring us into reliable contact with the 	Graded - why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> So that habituation can occur, but without doing something so overwhelmingly difficult to

<p>feared stimulus. We start with a situation that provokes fear but is manageable, repeating this until it is no longer difficult, and gradually work our way up through more difficult situations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start exposure exercises with an activity from our hierarchy that provokes 50%-60% anxiety when we start doing it • Repeat until this gives us only 40% or less anxiety on starting the activity, at which point we can move to the next activity on the hierarchy which should be slightly higher in terms of starting anxiety than the one before. 	<p>start with that it is too distressing to manage, or puts us off continuing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing something less than 50% would produce some, but not much, habituation, so wouldn't be very effective for all the effort we are putting in. Starting at 50-60% means we are getting good habituation, but without it being overwhelmingly difficult
<p>Prolonged - how</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying in our planned situation each time long enough for habituation to occur – we know this has happened when our anxiety has dropped by about 50%, ie it is half what it was when we entered the situation that time. At this point we can end the exercise. 	<p>Prolonged - why</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So that our autonomic system has time to learn the feared situation isn't actually dangerous, and therefore habituation can occur • Leaving before our anxiety drops by half would not allow us to habituate, so when we next repeat the exercise, we wouldn't notice a decrease in anxiety or feel that the treatment is 'working'
<p>Repeated - how</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat staying in each of our feared situations multiple times, until the anxiety we feel when entering the situation is only 40% or less. At this point we can stop repeating this situation and move onto the next activity on the hierarchy • We should repeat being in each feared situation ideally 4-5 times in the space of a week or so 	<p>Repeated - why</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each time we stay in a situation, we habituate a little more, until our brain no longer recognises this situation as really dangerous • Repeating the same situation frequently within a fairly short time frame means the new learning gets firmly embedded – leaving longer gaps between the exposure exercise is less effective
<p>Without distraction – how</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When in our feared situation we should not do anything to artificially lower the anxiety by using distractions, comforting or safety behaviours • Instead, we should simply experience being in the situation, allow ourselves to feel the physical anxiety and wait for it to recede naturally 	<p>Without distraction - why</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If we use distractions, safety behaviours or artificially comfort ourselves, our brain cannot learn that the feared stimulus itself is NOT dangerous – instead it seems that the situation was only 'safe' or OK due to the safety behaviour or distraction. Because this learning doesn't take place, the next time we encounter our feared stimulus we feel just as afraid as before • By allowing ourselves to just feel the anxiety but not respond to it with any 'safety behaviours' we are able to learn that the feared stimulus is not inherently dangerous - and we also learn to both tolerate the feelings of fear

	and that those feelings will just go away by themselves if we don't react.
Step 2 – Create a hierarchy	Phobia Ladder Worksheet
How <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think of practical, repeatable situations that would bring us into consistent contact with feared stimulus Rate each one on a scale of 0-100 for how much anxiety this would provoke and arrange in order of difficulty into Easy, Medium and Hard Ensure a good number of steps in each category The easiest activity should be no less than 50% Ensure situations can be stayed in for an indeterminate length of time, and never limit an activity by time (e.g. stay at the bus stop for 10 mins) Planned safety behaviours can be incorporated into a hierarchy, as 'stepping stones' to bridge between higher 'jumps' in rungs on the ladder, e.g. 'Go on into the park at a quieter time with John – 55%' and 'Go into the park at a quieter time alone – 65%' However planned safety behaviours must never include distractions, e.g. John must not chat, reassure etc, but be a silent presence 	Why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> So that we can practice encountering our feared stimulus in ways that follow the four conditions in order to get the most habituation from our efforts, starting with manageable situations and working our way up They must be practical and repeatable so that we can actually do them Having a good number of steps in each category means there are no unmanageable big 'jumps' between situations, that we might find too difficult or distressing Starting at 50% or above means we will get useful habituation right from our first activity Not limiting by time ensures we can meet the Prolonged condition Where needed, incorporating certain planned safety behaviours (but without distractions) means we can have manageable 'jumps' between rungs on our Phobia ladder, whilst still ensuring habituation occurs from the activity
Step 3: Undertake Exposure Activities	Facing My Phobia Worksheet
How <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start with an activity from the Easy category, ideally around 50-60% anxiety Write this at the top of the worksheet Plan several times when this can be undertaken, within a short space of each other, e.g. 4-5 in a week. Write the dates and times on the sheet Just before entering the feared situation rate anxiety and mark it in the 'Preparation' column Rate again when actually starting the activity in the 'Start' column and note the time. Stay in the situation, without distraction or safety behaviours until the starting anxiety drops by at least 50%, eg if 60% at the start, when it has fallen to 30% or less. Rate the anxiety again once leaving the feared situation (once starting anxiety has dropped by 50% or more), and note the time. 	Why <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As before, so effective habituation occurs but without being an overwhelmingly distressing experience Planning in advance makes exercises SMARTER and ensures that a good number take place within each week, so maximum habituation occurs and this new learning is embedded Rating our Preparation anxiety helps us to recognise how much of our anxiety is exacerbated by worrying about encountering the feared stimulus Tracking our start anxiety helps ensure we are meeting the Graded condition and shows when habituation has sufficiently occurred so that we can move onto the next activity on our hierarchy. It also shows us if an activity is higher or lower than expected, and therefore whether to re-rate on the ladder and choose another in order to meet the Graded condition.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not the duration it took from starting the activity to the end. • Write any notes about the experience. • Keep repeating the same activity, planning more in advance as needed until the anxiety on starting the activity is 40% or less anxiety. At this point the next activity can be selected from the ladder and the process started again with a new Facing My Phobia Worksheet • If on starting a new exposure activity the starting anxiety is significantly higher or significantly lower than predicted when planning the hierarchy, this activity can be re-rated within the hierarchy and another suitable activity from the hierarchy selected. • Keep repeating until feared stimulus no longer provokes disproportionate anxiety and treatment goals are reached 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking our end anxiety and duration helps ensure we are meeting the Prolonged condition, and confirms habituation is occurring as anxiety takes less and less time to reduce.
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