

Exercise

Professional Version | US English

Stimulus Discrimination



Description

Due to the way that trauma memories are processed it is common for survivors of trauma to experience involuntary recollection of their trauma memories. These are often experienced with a 'happening in the present' quality and can be extremely distressing.

Ehlers & Clark (2000) hypothesized that stimuli which were temporally associated with the traumatic event can act as triggers for involuntary recall of the trauma memory, and that over time these triggers may generalize from specific prompts closely associated to the trauma to broader categories of stimulus (stimulus generalization). This generalization results in a wider range of stimuli which can trigger feelings of distress, and can lead trauma survivors to act to avoid progressively wider ranges of situations. Stimulus discrimination is an effective treatment for this difficulty. Clients are guided to deliberately attend to differences between then (danger at the time of the trauma) and now (safety in the present).

Instructions

Stimulus discrimination can be framed to clients as a 'brain training' exercise with the rationale that their mind is attending to stimuli associated with their trauma and incorrectly interpreting them as signs of danger in the here-and-now. Clients should be guided to:

1. Record where they were when their memories of the trauma were triggered. What was happening?
2. Attend to any similarities between stimuli in the here-and-now and stimuli that were present at the time of the trauma. Many clients will find this relatively straightforward.
3. Clients should then be directed to deliberately and effortfully attend to differences between the time of the trauma and the present moment. The 'differences' box guides clients to attend to sights, sounds, touches, smells, tastes, and knowledge. Clients can be encouraged to systematically attend to each of these and ask themselves "what is different between now and then?"
4. Once differences have been noted which lead to the conclusion that the individual is safe in the here-and-now, clients should be encouraged to deliberately offer themselves reassurance that they are safe and that the trauma is in the past.

References

Ehlers, A., Clark, D. M. (2000). A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38, 319-345.

Stimulus Discrimination

Trauma memories are easily triggered by stimuli in the world around us. These triggers can be sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, or even ideas which resemble things that were present at the time of the trauma. When trauma memories are triggered like this they can be 're-experienced' – it can feel as though the trauma is happening again in the present moment. This is because your brain has not properly registered that the trauma event happened in the past. Stimulus discrimination trains your brain to put memories where they belong – in the past. With practice your mind will get better at noticing the differences between then and now – helping you to feel safer in the here-and-now.

Instructions

Try to do stimulus discrimination at a time when your trauma memory has been 'triggered'. It is most helpful to do it 'in the moment' or shortly afterward, but if that is not possible then think back to a recent unwanted memory.

1. First, record where you were and what you were doing when you had the unwanted memory.
2. Next, pay attention to any *similarities* between what you are experiencing now (in the present moment) and what you experienced at the time of the trauma. Similar sensations are what 'trigger' your flashbacks, so doing this can help you to work out what your triggers are.
3. Next pay attention to all of the *differences* between what you are experiencing now (in the present moment) versus what you experienced at the time of the trauma. Take your time and really notice everything you can.
4. Finally, to calm you mind and body *offer yourself reassurance* that you are safe now.

Situation / Trigger

Where were you when you had an unwanted trauma memory?
What was happening?

Similarities

Then (at the time of the trauma)

Now (in the present moment)

Differences

Then (at the time of the trauma)

Now (in the present moment)

Sight

Sound

Touch

Smell

Taste

Body

Knowledge

Reassurance

What can you say to soothe yourself now?

Stimulus Discrimination

Situation / Trigger

Where were you when you had an unwanted trauma memory?
What was happening?

Similarities

Then (at the time of the trauma)

Now (in the present moment)

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Now (in the present moment)

Sight

Sound

Touch

Smell

Taste

Body

Knowledge

Reassurance

What can you say to soothe yourself now?

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Situation / Trigger

Where were you when you had an unwanted trauma memory?

What was happening?

I was in my bedroom - I woke up from a nightmare about my car accident.

Similarities

Then (at the time of the trauma)

Now (in the present moment)

It was dark then and it is dark now.
I was scared then and I am feeling scared now.
It was quiet then (after the crash) and it is quiet now.

Differences

Then (at the time of the trauma)

Now (in the present moment)

I could see scenery at an angle because the car was on its side.

I could hear a 'ticking' sound of hot metal cooling down.

I could feel the seat belt digging in to me.

I could taste blood in my mouth.

I knew I had been in a car accident but I didn't know how bad it was.

Sight

Sound

Touch

Smell

Taste

Body

Knowledge

I can see my bedroom around me so I know I'm home safe.

I can hear my husband snoring.

I can feel the sheets of the bed

I can have a drink of water and it tastes cool and refreshing.

We moved to this house a few years after the accident so I know I survived.

Reassurance

What can you say to soothe yourself now?

I had a car crash five year ago. I have just had a nightmare where I re-lived the darkness and quietness that was present after the crash. This does not mean the crash is happening again. I am safe now. We all survived. It is safe to go back to sleep.

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