

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Exposure Therapy?



Description

Exposure as a therapy procedure is one of the most effective treatments for anxiety. *What Is Exposure Therapy?* is an information handout describing the purpose and mechanism of exposure therapy. It includes a simple clinical example to help patients understand how fears come about and how exposure can be used to treat fear.

This information handout uses a memory 'retrieval competition' (Brewin, 2006) account to explain exposure – this is consistent with other accounts (including classical conditioning explanations) but does not require knowledge of learning theory.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout. Suggested uses include:

- Client handout – a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – to provoke a discussion and explore your client's beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – to improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Supervision tool – to develop formulations and knowledge.
- Teaching resource – a learning tool during training.

References

Abramowitz, J. S., Deacon, B. J., Whiteside, S. P. H. (2011). *Exposure therapy for anxiety: principles and practice*. New York, Guilford.

Brewin, C. R. (2015). Reconsolidation versus retrieval competition: Rival hypotheses to explain memory change in psychotherapy. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 38.

Craske, M. G., Treanor, M., Conway, C. C., Zbozinek, T., & Vervliet, B. (2014). Maximizing exposure therapy: an inhibitory learning approach. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 58, 10-23.

What Is Exposure Therapy?

Exposure therapy is the most effective psychological treatment for anxiety. Exposure means 'facing your fears' and is the opposite of avoidance. When we avoid something that we fear, the fear only gets stronger: by avoiding we don't get to learn anything about our ability to cope. If we confront our fears and learn that we can cope then we become more able to manage similar situations in the future. Exposure can be done to real situations or to imagined ones. In psychological terms exposure leads to the *extinction of a learned fear response*.

What is exposure used for?

Exposure is an effective treatment for any type of fear including:

- Phobias – fears of specific objects, events, or situations.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – fear associated with painful memories of traumatic events.
- Panic attacks – fear of particular body sensations.
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) – various fears, e.g. of being contaminated, of causing harm to others.

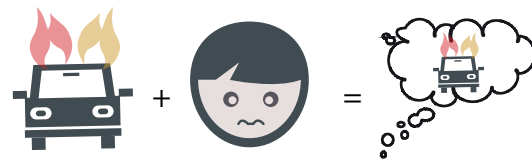
How exposure works

One helpful way to think about how exposure works is to consider memories. A scary event creates a 'fear memory' linking the object, event, or situation with a feeling of fear. Reminders activate this fear memory and make you feel afraid. It is not possible to get rid of old memories, but it is possible to create helpful new ones which will outnumber the old ones. Exposure therapy creates new memories linking the feared object, event, or situation with feelings of control, safety, or achievement. With successful exposure, whenever you are reminded of the object, event, or situation your mind learns to recall a good memory and you feel ok.

Let's consider an example:

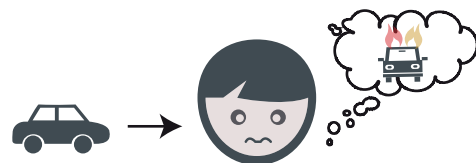
Step 1: Learning to be afraid of something

Bob is involved in a car crash. He feels very frightened at the time. A memory is created in Bob's mind which links cars with feeling afraid.



Step 2: The problem of fear

Reminders of the crash activate Bob's fear memory and make him feel afraid. His fear means that he avoids traveling in cars or on the road. This avoidance means that he doesn't get to learn how safe traveling by car normally is.



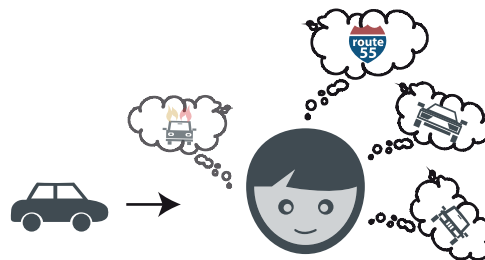
Step 3: Exposure therapy

As part of his treatment Bob is gradually exposed to cars in a variety of different situations. Nothing bad happens so he begins to feel safer around cars. He starts driving again.



Step 4: Anxiety is reduced

Exposure doesn't make the fear memory go away, it just creates new 'safe' memories. In potentially scary situations the old fear memory and the new safe memories 'compete' – whenever a reminder comes along Bob can be reminded of either the old fear memory or the new safe memory. The more exposure therapy he has done the more positive memories he will have to rely on and the more capable he will feel.



Graded exposure

Graded exposure is a gentler way of facing your fears. Fears are faced in order of increasing intensity, starting with something that is not too scary. Steps for graded exposure:

- Identify a ladder of increasingly fearful situations.
- Starting with the easiest, confront that object, event, or situation and stay there until your fear reduces.
- Don't move up the ladder until you feel comfortable at each step.



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