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# EXTENDING THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE THERAPY

**E**xposure therapy is a type of cognitive behavioural therapy supported by a large body of evidence as being an effective and powerful method to overcome anxiety. It improves quality of life by enabling a person to confront a fear and therefore cease avoiding something they feel a sense of dread about.

An example here would be of a person who is terrified of dying in a plane crash. By avoiding all air

travel, they successfully avoid the dreaded event but significantly decrease their quality of life. As this is done with the intention of controlling fear it's a defence mechanism people struggle to let go of as it's often experienced as effective.

Successful use of exposure therapy requires a great deal of commitment and investment from a client and sometimes needs lengthier sessions. If they're fully

committed to brave something that scares them it's possible to change unwanted learned responses into desired outcomes.

Such therapy has been hugely effective for conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, specific phobias and most presentations of anxiety provoking intrusive thoughts.

The success of exposure therapy is greatly enhanced if a

threefold approach is used. Only one or two of these it often doesn't bring about equally satisfactory results.

- The threefold approach:
1. Introducing relaxation techniques
  2. Addressing cognitive distortions
  3. Behavioural exposure

Sometimes, if considered beneficial some pharmacological intervention is also prescribed.

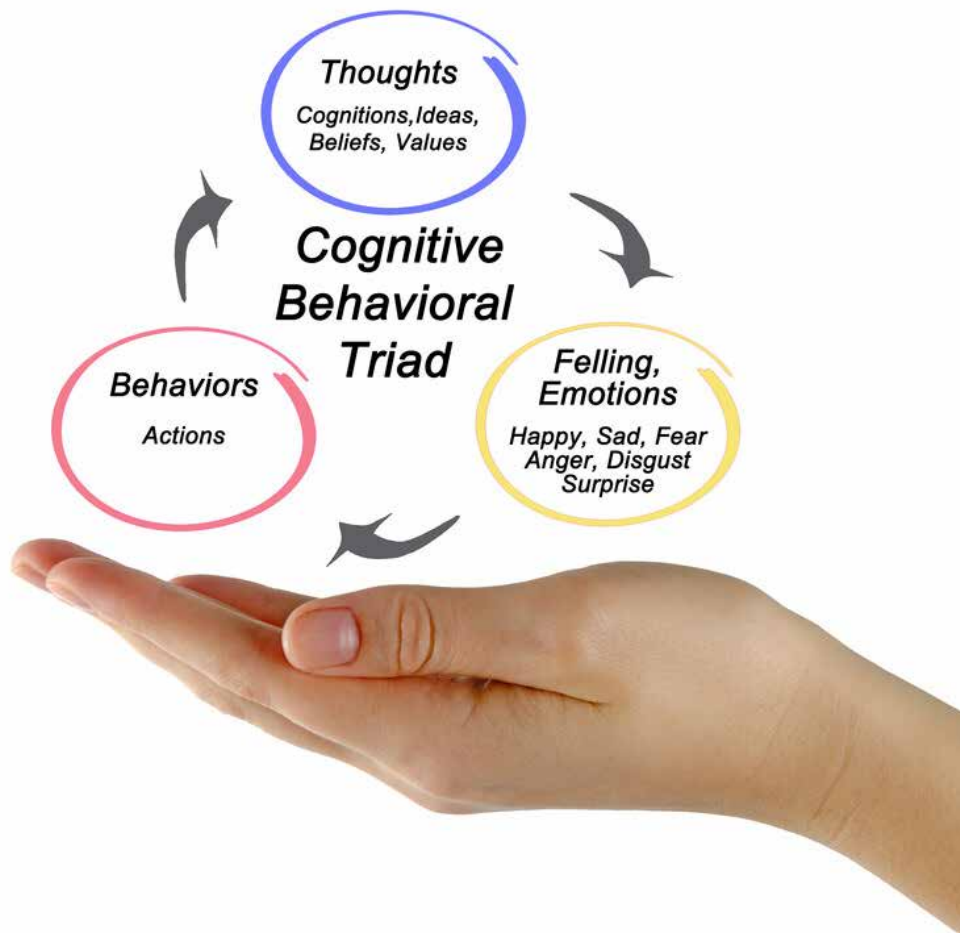
### 1. RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

When confronted with something a person fears it elicits a state of physical arousal with a real feeling of being in danger. A person's physical response may actually escalate due to the additional fear created by the physical distress.

Through these relaxation techniques, a person can enhance their ability to bring their physical arousal levels down. These levels will automatically decrease with continued exposure, but relaxation techniques can assist in achieving this result faster and is a helpful skill which can be transferred to effective mastery of other situations as well.

Should a person phobic of dogs be locked in a room with one their initial reaction would be an immediate flooding in terms of physical response. If this person is left in the room with the dog for hours and nothing distressing happens during this time they'll no longer have any discernible physiological response left as the initial acute elevation can't be maintained indefinitely.

The success of this approach will also come about due to the cognitive shift from "I'm in danger" to "Nothing's happening, I'm not in danger". This method of exposure is called flooding. This should be used with great caution as it can discourage clients from being willing to engage in the therapeutic process as it's often perceived as a lot more terrifying than gradual exposure. With flooding care should be taken not to abort prematurely. Should all physical arousal not be completely resolved the exercise may serve to confirm how frightening and traumatic the feared anxiety is.



### 2. COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Distorted beliefs that create anxiety and dread need to be addressed in conjunction with relaxation and exposure techniques. The belief that something is dangerous and intolerable to face leads to active avoidance. Initially a better awareness of distorted thinking is created through psychoeducation which assists in understanding

terrified of clowns or spiders; scared of heights, crowded rooms or public speaking. Sometimes fear can be related to thought patterns. Examples here would be fearing judgement by others or rejection when approaching the opposite sex. In these cases, exposure is not geared towards convincing a client that there are no risks with these situations but rather to create greater comfort and acceptance when rejection and judgement happen. Fear of judgement and rejection can be very limiting as people may avoid healthy behaviours such as social situations and romantic partnerships.

Once understanding is attained through psychoeducation, alternate and more accurate cognitions are introduced as part of the pre-exposure preparation. During exposure itself relaxation exercises should be paired with affirming internal dialogue. Affirmation could include reminding the person the threat is imagined and not real, that no real harm will come to them and that the physical reaction experienced is temporary and will subside. It can also include hints around capability and motivation to succeed.

As mentioned earlier,

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how thoughts and anxiety create distressing physical response which can lead to escalation of fear.

An accurate understanding of distorted thoughts is pivotal as exposure exercises are innovatively tailor-made, based on the specific fears deduced from them. Fears can be around something tangible such as being



understanding the fearful thought is important. Gary, a successful businessman in his fifties believed throughout his life that he had a heights phobia. It emerged his fears were not about heights but an unwanted intrusive thought that he may lunge from a high place and die. This enabled formulating a more effective exposure plan based on a fear of jumping rather than a fear of heights.

### 3. BEHAVIOURAL EXPOSURE

Exposure is either done through a gradual and systematic desensitisation or through flooding. Flooding needs to be used with caution by experienced practitioners.

Systematic desensitisation can be planned in conjunction with a client by creating a hierarchy of exposure together. By effectively moving up in the hierarchy of difficulty confidence is gained through mastery on every level. Clients are less likely to abandon the process as their gains are evident and their little successes confirm their ability to successfully

attempt the next step in their hierarchy. Exposure can be vividly imaginal, in vivo (real) or even in a virtual reality format. In fact, all three methods can be used in a hierarchy of exposure which may start by imagining an occurrence, then experiencing it virtually and eventually getting exposed to the actual experience. An example of a hierarchy could be:

- 3/10 Imagining a dog
  - 4/10 Looking at images of a dog in a book
  - 5/10 Watching a documentary about dogs
  - 6/10 Being in close proximity to a dog that is locked up and, on a lease,
  - 7/10 Entering the premises of the dog but it is still leashed
  - 8/10 Letting go of the lease but someone is holding the dog
  - 9/10 Letting go of the dog and allowing it to venture around you.
- Steps don't have to be this small if the client is able to effectively tolerate bigger steps.

It's recommended to have small tolerable exposure exercises

between sessions. This could include watching YouTube videos of feared events or attempting smaller and less frightening steps to further desensitise. Desensitising exposure to thought related content that's actively being suppressed could include having to write a thought out repeatedly or creating and writing stories about a dreaded event. In the case of obsessive compulsive disorder both thought, and behaviour may require desensitisation through exposure. This would require gradual desensitising techniques such as exposure to the obsession paired with some behavioural response prevention.

Many people believe they want to overcome their fears and may seek therapy in order to assist them with the process, but if they're not willing to be exposed to what they fear results are likely to be unsatisfactory. Exposure requires commitment and to some extent an admirable level of courage. **MHM**

**References available upon request**