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An experimental investigation of the role of safety-seeking behaviours in the maintenance of panic disorder with agoraphobia

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Abstract

This study evaluates the hypothesis that safety-seeking behaviours play an important role in maintaining anxiety because they prevent patients from benefiting from disconfirmatory experience. Patients suffering from panic disorder with agoraphobia carried out a behaviour test, closely followed by an experimental session, which included a brief (15 min) period of exposure during which participants either stopped or maintained within-situation safety-seeking behaviours. When the behaviour test was repeated within two days, patients who had stopped their safety-seeking behaviours during the experimental session showed a significantly greater decrease in catastrophic beliefs and anxiety than those who had maintained safety-seeking behaviour. This difference was also reflected in questionnaires measuring clinical anxiety. These results are consistent with the cognitive hypothesis. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The link between anxiety, panic and agoraphobic avoidance has received considerable attention over the past two decades. Behavioural approaches to the understanding and treatment of agoraphobia have largely focused on two process theory (Mowrer, 1960). According to this view, the development of avoidance is crucial to the *persistence* of classically conditioned agoraphobic anxiety by both preventing and prematurely terminating exposure to the CS and thereby preventing the extinction of conditioned fear responses. This behavioural theory provided the rationale for the development and implementation of exposure treatments

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(Mathews, Gelder, & Johnston, 1981; Rachman, 1990), which were found to be highly effective in reducing phobic anxiety.

More recently, two process theory has come under critical scrutiny both from within behaviour therapy and from those advocating a biological approach to the understanding and treatment of anxiety. Rachman (1976) questioned the theoretical utility of two process theory. He went on to question the central notion that escape behaviour strengthens subsequent avoidance in experimental studies (Rachman, Craske, Tallman, & Salyom, 1986). From a different perspective, others such as Marks (1987) suggest that learning theory approaches add nothing to the understanding and application of exposure treatments. Marks proposes instead that the “exposure principle” is all that is required to conceptualise fear reduction techniques, and that the questions which remain should primarily focus on how better to deliver exposure treatments.

Biological theories have emphasised the hypothesis that although agoraphobic behaviour consequence of panic attacks or panic-like symptoms (Gorman, Liebowitz, Fyer, & Stein, 1989) it is not a key factor in prolonging panic. Avoidance behaviour is a response to panic attacks, and secondary to them. When full panic attacks are not present, it is hypothesised that “panic-like symptoms” drive the avoidant behaviour. This way of viewing agoraphobia contrasts sharply with behavioural theories, and suggests that the main focus of treatment should be on the panic attacks and panic-like symptoms, with direct attention to agoraphobia only if avoidance does not fully remit once the panic symptoms have been dealt with. Given that exposure is known to be effective in the treatment of agoraphobia with panic disorder (Mathews et al., 1981), neither the behavioural nor the biological approach adequately explain the mechanism by which exposure has its effects.

To develop more effective fear reduction techniques, a theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved when exposure results in fear reduction is therefore required. The passing of the two stage theory of phobic avoidance has left a theoretical gap which, if not filled, is likely to hamper the further development of more effective psychological treatments for anxiety problems. The cognitive-behavioural theory of anxiety provides a coherent general account of the occurrence and maintenance of anxiety problems and can explain the effectiveness of exposure-based treatments. According to the cognitive-behavioural theory (Beck, 1976; Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985; Clark, 1986b; Salkovskis, 1996), anxiety disorders arise when situations are perceived as more dangerous than they really are. Once such a threat is (mis)perceived, at least three mechanisms may be involved in the maintenance of persistent high levels of anxiety; selective attention to threat-relevant stimuli, physiological arousal and safety-seeking behaviours. (The latter include avoidance and escape behaviour; as explained below they may also include other mechanisms.) Each of these reactions may occur as a response to threat and anxiety, and they may serve to amplify or maintain the crucial threat beliefs. The cognitive theory suggests that, in phobic anxiety, safety-seeking behaviour is particularly important in the maintaining perceived threat. The present paper describes an investigation of this factor in patients suffering from panic disorder with agoraphobia, building on the cognitive theory of panic (Clark, 1986a, 1988).

The agoraphobic believes that entering situations such as crowded shops is likely to result in some catastrophic physical or mental harm. The catastrophes most commonly feared during a panic attack include passing out, having a heart attack, going crazy, losing control over their

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