

The Effect of Distraction on Within-Session Anxiety Reduction During Brief In Vivo Exposure for Mild Blood-Injection Fears

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The present study examined the effects of attentional focus on anxiety reduction during in vivo exposure. Thirty-nine mildly blood- and injection-fearful subjects were randomly assigned to one of three brief (i.e., 10 minute) exposure conditions. Cognitive attention to the blood-and-injection stimuli was manipulated by engaging participants in either stimulus-relevant conversation (exposure-plus-focusing condition), stimulus-irrelevant conversation (exposure-plus-distraction condition), or no conversation (exposure alone). Attention was successfully manipulated, and while exposure-plus-distraction resulted in a greater decrease in anxiety within-session than both the exposure-plus-focusing and exposure-alone conditions, the three groups showed no difference at postexposure in the behavioral approach task. Implications for the practice of exposure techniques and theories of emotional processing are discussed.

Exposure in vivo is arguably the most widely used and powerful of the behavioral treatments for phobic anxiety (Andrews, Crino, Hunt, Lampe, & Page, 1994). In fact, "most studies . . . show that psychological treatments that do not incorporate exposure to feared situations do not have much efficacy against phobic fear" (McNally, 1994, p. 144; Schulte, Kunzel, Pepping, & Schulte-Bahrenberg, 1992). However, the psychological mechanisms by which exposure results in fear reduction remain unclear and hence there is debate about the optimal form of treatment. One of the more important debates has been the discussion whether distraction techniques can enhance the effectiveness of in vivo exposure or whether they interfere with fear reduction.

The influence of distraction techniques on the efficacy of exposure is an important issue. Although many view distraction as potentially interfering with long-term fear reduction during exposure (e.g., Andrews et al., 1994;

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Barlow, 1988), anxiety sufferers commonly use distraction techniques to cope with the exposure process (Clarke & Jackson, 1983). "Distraction is reportedly used often, both by clients as a method of coping with high levels of anticipatory anxiety, and by therapists in their instruction to clients of ways to approach feared situations" (Craske, Street, & Barlow, 1989, p. 664). In fact, it has been suggested that the selective attention for threat cues initially shown by anxious individuals (e.g., Mathews & MacLeod, 1986) then is naturally countered by an avoidance of further processing or elaboration of these cues (Rodriguez & Craske, 1993). Therefore, directing attention away from anxiety-provoking stimuli can be seen as a naturally occurring stage in managing anxiety. This is supported by the finding that an exposure-alone condition, where no instructions regarding focus of attention were given, was more similar to an exposure-plus-distraction condition than to an exposure-plus-focusing condition (Craske, Street, Jayaraman, & Barlow, 1991). Distraction also was one of a number of safety behaviors naturally used by social phobics that were hypothesized to maintain social anxiety (Wells et al., 1995). In addition to informing clinical practice, the answer to the question, "Does distraction interfere with or enhance fear reduction during in vivo exposure?" may further clarify how emotional information is processed and the necessary conditions for such processing.

Foa and Kozak (1986) have proposed one model for the processing of emotional information. They hypothesized that two conditions are necessary for fear reduction to occur. "First, the fear structure must be activated, and next, information incompatible with its pathological elements must be incorporated" (p. 21) into the fear structure. According to this Processing of Emotional Information Model (PEIM), exposure leads to fear reduction by eliciting the fear structure and then providing information that is in conflict with this structure (see also Craske et al., 1989). Therefore, distraction from the feared stimulus should interfere with functional exposure (Wells et al., 1995). This model predicts that subjects who engage in distraction during in vivo exposure will exhibit *smaller* decreases in subjective fear than subjects who remain focused on the stimuli.

In contrast to the PEIM, the Affective Control Model (ACM; Rachman, 1976; Rachman, deSilva, & Roper, 1976) suggests that distraction techniques may actually increase the efficacy of exposure. Distraction allows the individual to remain in the feared situation, and provides them with a coping technique that enhances feelings of self-efficacy and self-control. This instills a sense of control that leads to a reduction in fear and anxiety (Barlow, 1988). Consistent with this view, distraction enhances the long-term efficacy of exposure for social phobics (Butler, Cullington, Munby, Amies, & Gelder, 1984). Thus, the ACM predicts that subjects who engage in distraction during in vivo exposure will report *greater* decreases in subjective fear than subjects who remain focused on the stimulus.

The handful of studies that have examined the effects of distraction on

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