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# Attention to phobic stimuli during exposure: the effect of distraction on anxiety reduction, self-efficacy and perceived control

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## Abstract

To replicate and extend the finding that distraction facilitates between session anxiety reduction (Oliver & Page (2003)), 27 spider phobics underwent three 10-min sessions of in vivo exposure followed by one 10-min exposure session at a 4-week follow-up, while having either stimulus-relevant focused conversation or stimulus-irrelevant distracting conversation with the experimenter. Physiological arousal and subjective anxiety were measured during exposure, and self-efficacy, perceived control and performance on a behavioural task were measured at pre-treatment, post session-3, and follow-up. Monitoring and blunting coping styles were also measured at pre-treatment to assess their impact on treatment outcome. Despite equal physiological activation between the groups, those who underwent distracted exposure showed greater reductions in subjective fear within and between sessions, and showed greater increases in self-efficacy ratings, internal perceived control and performance on a behavioural task. Coping style did not interact with the effect of distraction or focusing during exposure, however bluntners had less subjective anxiety reduction overall, particularly when they underwent focused exposure. Results are discussed in terms of the emotional processing model and self-efficacy theory.

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*Keywords:* Distraction; Exposure; Fear reduction; Spider phobia; Emotional processing; Self-efficacy; Perceived control; Coping style

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the impact of attention to phobic stimuli during exposure is important for the treatment of phobic anxiety for several reasons. Firstly, during “natural” exposure an “attentional shift toward threat-stimuli is counteracted by a conscious attempt to cognitively avoid the stimulus” (Craske, Street, Jayaraman, & Barlow, 1991; p. 209), a tendency often seen in exposure treatment when patients distract attention away from the phobic object/situation as a means of coping with or reducing anxiety (Craske, Street, & Barlow, 1989). Secondly, some therapists instruct patients to use distraction when approaching feared situations (Crask et al., 1989) to increase the probability and duration of exposure (Beck, Emery, & Greengerg, 1985). Thirdly, models of exposure predict that the direction of attention influences the process of anxiety reduction. In particular, the emotional processing model (Foa & Kozak, 1986) argues that distraction interferes with sensory encoding of information presented during exposure, thereby inhibiting formation of a new memory of the feared event, resulting in less anxiety reduction.

A number of studies have investigated the impact of *distracting attention away from the phobic stimulus* versus *focusing attention towards the phobic stimulus*, on anxiety reduction. However, given variation between studies in levels of participant’s stimulus bound anxiety, the types of anxiety-disordered participants treated, the duration and number of exposure sessions, and the indexes of therapeutic change, the findings are difficult to interpret. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to interpretation is the wide variation in the types of distraction used and consequently, the degree to which attention is distracted away from the phobic stimulus.

Some research with animal-fearful participants has found that, compared to visual focusing, visual distraction during exposure slows the therapeutic response (e.g., Mohlman & Zinbarg, 2000; Rodriguez & Craske, 1995). However, other studies have shown that when distraction was cognitive (e.g., verbal material presented auditorily) rather than visual, and when participants with a phobic level of fear underwent exposure, distraction did not have the same detrimental effects (e.g., Antony, McCabe, Leeuw, Sano, & Swinson, 2001; Craske et al., 1991). The results of studies that included a follow-up period suggest that distracted exposure may enhance anxiety reduction during exposure, but that gains are not maintained on all indexes of change. For example, two studies using obsessive–compulsive participants, found within session reductions in subjective fear failed to generalise to between session reductions in those who underwent distraction (Grayson, Foa, & Steketee, 1982, 1986). Research using other participant populations has also found poorer longer-term treatment outcomes for those who underwent distraction during exposure (e.g., Haw & Dickerson, 1998: mildly spider-fearful participants with a same day follow-up; Kamphuis & Telch, 2000: moderate to severe claustrophobic participants with a 2-week follow-up; and Craske et al., 1989: agoraphobic participants with a 6-month follow-up).

However, a recent series of studies has demonstrated the benefits of using distraction during exposure. Penfold and Page (1999) investigated the impact of stimulus-irrelevant neutral conversation with mild to severe blood and injection-fearful participants in a single exposure session. Participants having a distracting conversation during exposure reported significantly lower subjective fear compared to those having a focusing conversation about the phobic stimuli, their thoughts, feelings and physiological responses. Aside from the 1982 study by Grayson et al. (replicated and extended by Grayson et al., 1986), Penfold and Page’s study is the first to be fol-

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