

Reconceptualizing emetophobia: A cognitive–behavioral formulation and research agenda

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Abstract

Fear of vomiting (emetophobia) is a poorly understood anxiety disorder, with little research published into its conceptualization or treatment. The current article uses established cognitive and behavioral models of other anxiety disorders as a basis from which to propose a detailed model of emetophobia. The model proposes that emetophobia results from a constellation of factors including a general anxiety-vulnerability factor, a tendency to somatize anxiety as gastrointestinal distress, a tendency to catastrophically misappraise nausea and other gastrointestinal symptoms, hypervigilance to gastrointestinal cues, beliefs about the unacceptability of vomiting, negatively reinforced avoidance behavior, and selective confirmation biases. A formulation-based treatment package for emetophobia is outlined, including arousal management skills, distraction/attention training, exposure and cognitive restructuring.

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Conceptual models of the anxiety disorders have evolved considerably since the introduction of behavioral techniques in the 1950s and the incorporation of cognitive theory in the last decades of the twentieth century. Early behavioral associative learning theories have changed to recognize the importance of non-associative learning mechanisms (e.g., [Rachman, 1991, 1990, 1977](#)) in fear acquisition. While other anxiety disorders, for example, Panic Disorder and Social Phobia, have experienced a thorough cognitive reformulation (e.g., [Clark, 1986; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997](#)), others are yet to fully benefit from developments in conceptualization and treatment that incorporates cognitive factors.

One example of such a specific phobia that is overdue for reconceptualization is fear of vomiting (emetophobia). Knowledge about specific prevalence rates for fear of vomiting is

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limited, with no studies looking specifically at this fear (Lipsitz, Fyer, Paterniti, & Klein, 2001). Kartsounis, Mervyn-Smith, and Pickersgill (1983), in a sample of 547 students, found fear of becoming nauseous as the 16th most intense fear among a selection of 88 fears from the Fear Survey Schedule III (Wolpe, 1973)—higher than recognized and researched phobias such as spider phobia, and fear of heights. Not only in prevalence studies, but across the literature, fear of vomiting has received little attention from researchers, and has been placed in the mixed-bag category of “Specific Phobia (Other Type)” by the authors of the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2000). This has had the unfortunate effect of minimizing research into emetophobia as a specific distinct disorder. Studies which look at the classification of phobias, and the characteristics of phobias make scarce mention of this Other category, if at all, and no direct mention of fear of vomiting (e.g., Antony, Brown, & Barlow, 1997; Cox, McWilliams, Clara, & Stein, 2003).

This lack of knowledge of the nature of emetophobia is surprising given recently published data on the impact of the illness. In a sample of 56 emetophobics, Lipsitz et al. (2001) reported that emetophobia was associated with an early onset, chronic course (with a large subgroup reporting no periods of remission), and marked impairment for a large proportion of sufferers. Despite this, treatment–outcome studies are scarce (with no controlled outcome data), and there has been little specific examination of the cognitive factors involved in fear of vomiting, and consequently no incorporation of cognitive techniques into treatment packages specifically tailored to emetophobia.

The current article aims to briefly review the current conceptualization of fear of vomiting, and proposes a novel, detailed account of the etiological and maintaining factors associated with the illness. Previous treatment research is reviewed and used to propose a formulation-based cognitive–behavioral intervention for emetophobia. Methods for validation of the proposed model and treatment approach are discussed.

1. Clinical presentation of emetophobia

The nature of emetophobia symptoms remains poorly understood, as does the exact nature of emetophobia presentations clinical practice. The most comprehensive review of emetophobia symptoms to date was presented by Lipsitz et al. (2001) in which the authors reported on the results of an internet-based survey of 56 self-selected individuals with fear of vomiting. Although the non-random sample used by the authors did not have their diagnoses verified by mental health professionals, the data presented by these authors serve as a good initial starting point in a more thorough understanding of the phenomenology of the disorder.

In their sample of emetophobic individuals, Lipsitz et al. (2001) reported that sufferers were characterized by a very early illness onset, and a persistent, chronic course with little or no periods of remission. The illness caused considerable distress and impairment. The vast majority of respondents were females, suggesting a similar gender-imbalance as seen in most other anxiety disorders. Most were more concerned with vomiting themselves, rather than others vomiting in their presence, and most were more concerned about vomiting in public.

A large proportion of individuals also reported panic attacks unrelated to their emetophobia. In these cases, the vast majority (over 80%) experienced significant gastrointestinal symptoms as part of these panic attacks. Many individuals with emetophobia from the Lipsitz et al. (2001) study also reported other comorbid psychological (especially anxiety) disorders.

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