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A naturalistic examination of positive expectations, time course, and disgust in the origins and reduction of spider and insect distress

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Abstract

We used a naturalistic method to examine the causes of changes in individuals' reactions to, and feelings about, spiders and insects. In this descriptive retrospective study, 50 college students who reported substantial changes in their attitudes toward spiders and/or insects (in the absence of professional treatment) underwent telephone interviews about the change process. We found that individuals frequently describe the role of positive experiences and expectations in positive change and some individuals report sudden changes. Further, descriptions of the important role of disgust in the change process were common. We discuss the implications of our findings for understanding the etiology and treatment of spider and insect distress and make a case for the usefulness of naturalistic methods in expanding scientific knowledge.

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Current spider¹ phobia conceptualizations, treatment, and research generally tend to overlook several important issues, including the influence of positive beliefs, the time course of acquisition and treatment, and the potential usefulness of naturalistic study. Conceptualizations of spider phobia have focused on the presence of negative, often irrational, beliefs about spiders and relatively ignore the absence of positive beliefs. Similarly, treatments for spider phobia attempt to reduce or eliminate negative beliefs and expectations about spiders, whereas positive beliefs and expectations typically receive little attention. Further, although sudden, rapid treatment recovery is reported across many phobia subtypes, phobia researchers have not yet focused on the explanation or prediction of such rapid changes. In fact, it is not uncommon for the phobia treatment literature to proceed as though treatments produce cumulative, gradual changes. In this paper, we will address some alternative ways of thinking about the etiology, treatment, and study of spider phobia.²

Spider distress conceptualizations, terminology, and treatments have tended to focus on the elimination of negative beliefs about spiders and largely ignore the potential role of positive beliefs. Exposure-based treatments, for example, tend to focus on disconfirming inaccurate negative beliefs about spiders, but typically do not directly address the acquisition and/or strengthening of positive beliefs about spiders. Although, decades ago, the role of positive beliefs and expectations was speculated about (Bandura, Blanchard, & Ritter, 1969), was examined in the context of speech phobia (Grayson & Borkovec, 1978), and was noted in a naturalistic study (Kleinknecht, 1982), most contemporary researchers do not examine the role of positive beliefs in the treatment of specific phobias.

There has been debate in the treatment literature about the factors responsible for early rapid response to cognitive behavioral therapy, and this debate is undoubtedly relevant to the treatment of spider distress. Early rapid response has been described in the treatment of spider phobia (Öst, 1996; Rachman & Whittal, 1989), flying phobia (Öst, Brendberg, & Alm, 1997), blood phobia (Hellstroem, Fellenius, & Öst, 1996), claustrophobia (Booth & Rachman, 1992), depression (Iliardi & Craighead, 1994), substance abuse (Breslin, Sobell, Sobell, Buchan, & Cunningham, 1997), and eating disorders (Wilson, 1999). Iliardi and Craighead (1994, 1999) suggested that rapid improvement may be due to nonspecific factors, such as the amelioration of hopelessness caused by treatment rationale and assignment of homework. Tang and DeRubeis (1999) argued that “rapid” improvement simply reflects a dose–response relationship, a response to large numbers of treatment sessions offered early in the course of treatment.

¹ Due to the paucity of theorizing and research concerning insect phobia, our literature review will focus on spider and animal phobias.

² The terminology typically used to describe responses to spiders is reflective of a theoretical focus on fear: the term “phobia” is defined as a fear and avoidance response and the term spider “fear” is typically substituted for “phobia” when assessment is conducted via questionnaire rather than via diagnostic interview. We will use the term spider “distress” because it is not associated with a particular emotion.

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