

Does Distraction Interfere With Fear Reduction During Exposure? A Test Among Animal-Fearful Subjects

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Theoretical conceptualizations of distraction as an inhibitor of fear reduction during exposure were tested among 60 subjects with marked animal fears. Subjects underwent high or low intensity *in vivo* exposure in the presence of highly affective slides (high distraction), neutral slides (low distraction), or no slides. Self-reported attention did not differ between the high and low distraction groups; thus, data from these groups were combined in the analyses. The combination of distraction and high exposure intensity was found to interfere both with self-reported fear reduction during exposure and with the pre- to post-exposure behavioral approach tasks; improvement in pre- to post-exposure behavioral approach was impeded also. Distraction had no impact under low intensity exposure conditions. Counter to prediction, return of fear was not evident across groups. Heart rate increased in all groups during exposure, suggesting a possible sensitization effect. Theoretical and clinical implications are discussed, and recommendations for future research are provided.

Major anxiety models, including Watts' (1971) Habituation Model, Foa and Kozak's (1986) Emotional Processing Model, and Barlow's (1988) Anxious Apprehension Model, suggest that distraction interferes with fear reduction during exposure by preventing attentional focus toward the phobic stimulus. As a consequence of poor attentional focus, stimulus representations of the phobic object are improperly encoded into memory. In turn, retrieval of stimulus representations from memory may be impeded by their poor match with actual stimuli. Habituation models state that the poorer the match between phobic objects and their stimulus representations, the less likely habituation, or decline in fear response amplitude over repeated exposures, will occur (Groves & Thompson, 1970; Watts). Similarly, the Emotional Processing model posits that inadequate stimulus encoding prevents full elicitation of the fear response, as well as acquisition and integration of safety information into memory, both of which are necessary for fear reduction (Foa & Kozak).

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Finally, Barlow proposes that distraction interferes with attentional shifts from a self-directed and negative focus to a mechanical and objective focus on the phobic object, the former characterizing fear maintenance. Given these conceptualizations of distraction, anxiety models generally recommend that attentional focus be maximized during exposure therapies.

Research on the effects of distraction during exposure, however, has yielded variable findings. For example, Grayson, Foa, and Steketee (1982) documented similar amounts of self-reported fear reduction, but higher overall fear levels, during distracted exposure, in comparison to focused exposure, among individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In contrast, a follow-up study (Grayson, Foa, & Steketee, 1986) found greater fear reduction among subjects undergoing distracted exposure versus focused exposure, resulting in lower fear levels at exposure endpoint in the former condition. A third study (Craske, Street, Jayaraman, & Barlow, 1991) of animal-phobic subjects documented similar levels of fear and similar amounts of fear reduction between distracted and natural exposure conditions, yet higher fear levels and fear increase during focused exposure. In terms of physiological response during exposure, all three studies (Craske et al., 1991; Grayson et al., 1982, 1986) documented similar levels of heart rate during distracted and focused exposure, with no significant within-session reduction during distracted exposure.

Findings regarding between-session habituation have also varied. The return of fear following distracted exposure, in contrast to between-session habituation following focused exposure (Grayson et al., 1982), was not replicated in the follow-up study (Grayson et al., 1986) where both conditions led to return of fear. The only long-term treatment study (Craske, Street, & Barlow, 1989) of distraction effects during exposure therapy (among individuals with panic disorder and agoraphobia) documented improvement in panic and agoraphobic avoidance measures in both focused and distracted exposure treatment groups by posttreatment assessment. However, there was more deterioration of treatment gains among subjects in the distracted exposure group by the 6-month follow-up.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the immediate and short-term effects of continuous distraction during *in vivo* exposure to feared stimuli. It was hypothesized that distraction would interfere with fear reduction during exposure, in comparison to a no-distraction condition. Similarly, interference with short-term fear reduction following distracted exposure was expected; thus, greater return of fear was hypothesized from distraction conditions. Aspects of the distractor, as well as the exposure situation, were manipulated. Distractors of high and low attentional demand were examined; impedance of fear reduction was hypothesized to be greater with increased attention to the distractor. Furthermore, the interaction between distraction and exposure intensity was examined. It was hypothesized that distraction would exert greater effects under conditions of low intensity exposure, whereas under intense stimulus conditions, the salience of the stimulus would override the influence of distraction.

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