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Computers in  
Human Behavior

Computers in Human Behavior 22 (2006) 1080–1095

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## An evaluation of two clinically-derived treatments for technophobia

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Available online 23 March 2006

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### Abstract

Technology is ubiquitous in our occupational, educational and leisure lives. A fear of interacting with technology can therefore have a major impact on the quality of an individual's life. This is particularly salient within education as an inability to maximise the benefits of technology may limit academic achievement and subsequent opportunities in life. The severity of the anxiety induced by technology has lead to a plethora of research into the prevalence of 'technophobia'. This term may have clinical relevance and has been found to be comparable in severity to more traditional phobias [Thorpe, S. J. & Brosnan, M. (in press). Does computer anxiety reach levels which conform to DSM IV criteria for specific phobia? *Computers in Human Behavior*]. This paper presents two studies examining the effect of clinically-derived treatments upon levels of anxiety induced by technology. Study 1 was a 10-week selective desensitisation programme with 16 participants (eight computer anxious, eight non-anxious). Over this period computer anxiety and coping cognitions were significantly improved in the computer anxious group and become comparable to those of the matched non-anxious controls. Study 2 was a single treatment session for anxiety. Thirty individuals identified as anxious were assigned to either a one-session treatment ( $n = 9$ ) or non-treatment ( $n = 21$ ) group. Initially, both groups were significantly more anxious than the non-anxious control group ( $n = 59$ ). Subsequent testing established that over the period of an academic year the reduction in anxiety was three times greater in the treated group than the non-treated group such that by the end of the year the treated group no longer differed

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from the control group, whereas the non-treated group remained significantly more anxious. The implications and limitations of the studies are discussed.

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**Keywords:** Computer anxiety; Technophobia; Computer phobia; Systematic desensitization

## 1. Introduction

“I believe I am absolutely, wildly, technophobic. Even when I hear people on the telephone telling me to do various things, I cannot do it. I cannot do my video. I have never used my cash card in the bank and I do not know how to use a computer, I am absolutely terrified...” (C.V.).

The quote above came unprompted from a participant asked to take part in a study examining technophobia in the 21st century. Technophobia refers to a heightened level of anxiety induced by Information Technology (IT), typically computers, and can be defined as ‘an irrational anticipation of fear evoked by the thought of using (or actually using) computers, the effects of which result in avoiding, or minimising, computer usage’ (Brosnan, 1998, p. 17). This definition draws upon a plethora of research that has identified significant levels of technophobia in virtually every population tested such as the police, teachers, office workers, college students, school children and the general public (Bozionelos, 1996; Brosnan, 1999; Brosnan & Davidson, 1996; Marcoulides, Mayers, & Wiseman, 1995; Rosen & Weil, 1990; Rosen & Weil, 1995; Rosen, Sears, & Weil, 1987; Todman & Dick, 1993; Weil & Rosen, 1995; see also Brosnan, 1998; Brosnan & Davidson, 1994; Chua, Chen, & Wong, 1999; Maurer, 1994; Rosen & Maguire, 1990; Whitely, 1996). These studies, reviews and meta-analyses consistently report that around a third of all those sampled report a heightened level of anxiety when faced with technology. In one of the larger studies of around 1300 college students, Rosen, Sears, and Weil (1993) report that 37% registered as technophobic. Within the technophobic sample, a far smaller proportion, typically around 13%, report far more aversive reactions to technology, such as sweaty palms and heart palpitations (Rosen et al., 1993). This constitutes around 5% of the entire sample exhibiting classic signs of an anxiety reaction in the presence of IT. People experiencing this level of technophobia are comparable (i.e., not significantly different) in measures of anxiety and phobic beliefs to those with spider phobia – both groups significantly differing from controls (Thorpe & Brosnan, *in press*). In both cases, individuals may additionally express fear of coming to harm, of losing control or of panicking.

There can be little doubt that the anxiety induced by technology constitutes ‘a real phenomenon’ (Moldafsky & Kwon, 1994, p. 302, see also Anthony, Clarke, & Anderson, 2000; Bozionelos, 2001; Brosnan, 1998; Gurcan-Namlu & Ceyling, 2003; Rosen & Maguire, 1990) the assessment of which demonstrates both reliability and validity (Chua et al., 1999; Dukes, Discenza, & Couger, 1989). Whilst the term technophobia has been used to describe those uncomfortable with and anxious about IT, not all of these individuals would be comparable to traditional clinically defined phobias. The evidence above, however, suggests the possibility that around 1 in 20 may experience a level of technophobia that is comparable to the more traditional clinically defined phobias: a figure that has remained remarkably consistent (Todman & Day, 2006).

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