

Exposure Work for Trauma Memories

Exposure work on trauma memories is a valuable therapeutic approach that allows clients to process and reduce the impacts of traumatic experiences. By gradually confronting and engaging with the memories in a safe and controlled manner, clients can experience relief and develop new perspectives on their past traumas. This handout provides an overview of exposure work and highlights key points for therapists to consider when using exposure techniques with their clients.

1 Understanding Exposure Work

Exposure involves systematically confronting and processing traumatic memories to reduce their emotional impacts. It can be approached from a behavioral perspective, as seen in cognitive processing therapy or prolonged exposure therapy. Exposure can be done through writing, oral communication, or listening to recordings.

2 Collaborating on an Exposure Hierarchy

A prioritized exposure hierarchy is developed in collaboration with the client to address the traumatic events they have experienced. The hierarchy is organized based on the level of distress associated with each event, ensuring a structured and progressive approach to the therapeutic process. It is important to note that not all traumatic events need to be discussed in detail, especially when clients have experienced multiple traumas. The focus is on working up to those events which carry the most distress and significance.

3 Choosing the Exposure Method

Consider the client's preferences and strengths when selecting the method of exposure. Written exposure, oral communication, or recordings can all be effective.

4 Written Exposure Process

Written exposure involves writing about the traumatic event in detail. Clients are encouraged to describe the event, their related emotions, and its impact on their thoughts about themselves, others, and the world. The initial assignment is for clients to write about the event outside therapy. In subsequent sessions, clients read their written account out loud, allowing the therapist to validate their experiences and emotions. Feedback may be provided to address any missing elements or areas that lack emotional description. As a homework assignment, clients are encouraged to rewrite the narrative with increased emotional engagement and read it aloud to themselves daily. This practice helps the client to connect completely with their thoughts, memories, and emotions associated with the trauma.

5 Progression Through the Exposure Hierarchy

The exposure process is repeated for each traumatic event in the hierarchy. The therapist guides the client through reading and revising their written accounts, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of each event. Creating a supportive and nonjudgmental environment during this process is essential, as clients may encounter intense emotions and challenges. The therapist's role is to provide guidance, facilitate emotional exploration, and encourage the client's commitment to their healing journey.

Consider the duration of exposure work based on the client's needs and progress. Allocate an appropriate timeframe for each traumatic event in the exposure hierarchy, and adjust as necessary as the treatment evolves.

6 Traditional vs ACT-Based Exposure

Traditionally, exposure therapy has focused on anxiety habituation and attenuation, aiming to reduce distress over time. In the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) model, while subjective units of distress can be used, the primary goal is to foster awareness and mindfulness rather than solely focusing on reducing distress levels. From an ACT perspective, it is recognized that people may not have control over the intensity of their emotional responses. Instead, the emphasis is on empowering them to live meaningfully and move forward in their lives, even in the presence of challenging emotions such as guilt, shame, or grief.

Key Points

- Guide the client in writing a detailed account of the traumatic event.
- The client reads the written account aloud in therapy sessions, and the therapist provides them with validation and feedback.
- Assign the client the homework task of rewriting and repeating the narrative with increased emotional engagement.