

Prolonged Exposure Therapy for PTSD: An Overview

This handout provides a summarized overview of prolonged exposure (PE) therapy, a method effectively used in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PE therapy targets avoidance behaviors and promotes emotional processing of traumatic events.

The Theoretical Framework

The foundation of PE therapy is the concept of a 'fear structure' in the patient's memory, which triggers responses to perceived danger. This structure includes feared stimuli (e.g., a tall bald man), fear responses (such as heart pounding or crying), and the meanings attached to these stimuli and responses.

Techniques in PE Therapy

PE therapy involves two types of exposure:

- Imaginal exposure: Confronting the trauma memory mentally.
- In vivo exposure: Confronting trauma reminders in real life.

The goal is to reduce distress through repeated exposure, challenging the fear structure with new, corrective experiences.

1 Imaginal Exposure

In imaginal exposure, therapists guide patients to repeatedly confront the trauma memory, aiming to naturally reduce distress. Key aspects include:

- Recounting the memory: Understanding the details of the event and the patient's reactions.
- Therapeutic inquiry: Facilitating changes in perceptions and memories over sessions.

2 In Vivo Exposure

In vivo exposure involves therapists assisting patients to safely confront real-world situations or objects associated with their trauma. This technique aims to reduce avoidance behaviors and enhance the patient's control over their fear responses. Key to this approach is a gradual progression, starting with less challenging situations and progressively confronting more difficult ones. This process of systematic exposure helps patients to manage and reduce their distress, fostering a sense of mastery over previously feared circumstances.

Addressing Self-Blame and Context

Therapy focuses on understanding the context of the trauma, often leading to a reduction in self-blame. Patients learn to view their actions as appropriate to the circumstances of the traumatic event.

Reframing Trauma Narratives

Patients are guided to challenge and reframe narratives that exacerbate their PTSD. Through detailed exploration of the traumatic event, patients often achieve a more realistic understanding, leading to a significant shift in perspective.

Key Points

- PE therapy addresses PTSD by confronting avoidance and promoting emotional processing.
- Using imaginal and in vivo exposure combines mental confrontation of trauma memories with real-life exposure to trauma reminders.
- Reframing and contextualizing trauma: Focuses on understanding the context of the trauma and reframing narratives to reduce distress and self-blame.