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Oral Presentation

Exposure Therapy's Two Cultures: Anxiety-Reducing vs. Anxiety-Increasing Treatment

Brett Deacon*

School of Psychology, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

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Abstract

Exposure-based cognitive behavioral therapy ("exposure therapy") is the most effective psychological treatment for anxiety disorders. However, popular exposure-based treatments differ substantially in how exposure is delivered, and emerging research indicates that the effectiveness of exposure is closely tied to its manner of delivery. The author will present research indicating that there are two exposure therapy delivery styles: an anxiety-reducing and an anxiety-increasing style. Compared to anxiety-increasing therapists, therapists who emphasize reducing anxiety during exposure have higher anxiety themselves, greater negative beliefs about exposure, view their clients as less able to tolerate anxiety, and view exposure as working by providing the client with anxiety-reducing coping skills. Popular evidence-based exposure therapies can easily be classified as emphasizing an anxiety-reducing vs. anxiety-increasing delivery style, and evidence suggests the latter is more effective than the former. Using case examples from clients and clinicians-in-training, the clinical implications of these issues will be discussed.

Keywords: Anxiety, Exposure therapy, Treatment

Corresponding Author: Brett Deacon
E-mail: *Bdeacon@uow.edu.au*

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