

Systematic Desensitization

Practical- 2

A decorative graphic consisting of several horizontal lines of varying lengths and colors (teal, light blue, white) extending from the right side of the slide towards the center.

Introduction

- Joseph Wolpe, a pioneer of behavioral therapy, developed a technique called systematic desensitization for the treatment of anxiety-related disorders and phobias.

Basic Concept

- This technique is based on the principles of **classical conditioning** and the premise that what has been learned (conditioned) can be unlearned. Ample research shows that systematic desensitization is effective in reducing anxiety and **panic attacks** associated with fearful situations.

classical conditioning

- Classical conditioning is a type of learning that had a major influence on the school of thought in psychology known as behaviorism. Discovered by Russian physiologist **Ivan Pavlov**, classical conditioning is a learning process that occurs through associations between an environmental stimulus and a naturally occurring stimulus.

- Behaviorism is based on the assumption that:
- All learning occurs through interactions with the environment
- The environment shapes behavior

How Classical Conditioning Works

- Phase 1: Before Conditioning
- The first part of the classical conditioning process requires a naturally occurring stimulus that will automatically elicit a response. Salivating in response to the smell of food is a good example of a naturally occurring stimulus.

- Phase 2: During Conditioning
- During the second phase of the classical conditioning process, the previously neutral stimulus is repeatedly paired with the unconditioned stimulus. As a result of this pairing, an association between the previously neutral stimulus and the UCS is formed.

- Phase 3: After Conditioning
- Once the association has been made between the UCS and the CS, presenting the conditioned stimulus alone will come to evoke a response even without the unconditioned stimulus. The resulting response is known as the conditioned response (CR)

Procedure

- Systematic desensitization usually starts with imagining yourself in a progression of fearful situations and using relaxation strategies that compete with anxiety. Once you can successfully manage your anxiety while imagining fearful events, you can use the technique in real-life situations.

- This therapy aims to remove the fear response of a phobia, and substitute a relaxation response to the conditional stimulus gradually using counter conditioning.
- The number of sessions required depends on the severity of the phobia. Usually 4-6 sessions, up to 12 for a severe phobia. The therapy is complete once the agreed therapeutic goals are met (not necessarily when the person's fears have been completely removed).

- Exposure can be done in two ways:
- **In vitro** – the client imagines exposure to the phobic stimulus.
- **In vivo** – the client is actually exposed to the phobic stimulus.
- Research has found that in vivo techniques are more successful than in vitro (Menzies & Clarke, 1993)

Goal

- The goal of systematic desensitization is to become gradually desensitized to the triggers that are causing your distress.
- Before beginning systematic desensitization, one need to have mastered relaxation training and developed a hierarchy (from least feared to most feared) list of his/her feared situations.

Learning to Relax

- Before we can begin gradually exposing oneself to the feared situations, one must first learn and practice some relaxation techniques. Some techniques commonly used in relaxation training include:
 - Deep Breathing
 - Progressive Muscle Relaxation
 - Visualization
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Systemic Desensitization Steps

- Create an Anxiety Hierarchy
- Start With Your Least Fear
- Continue to Journey up the Fear Ladder
- Face Your Greatest Fear