Rationale for imaginal exposure

Before you start imaginal exposure with your client, you should spend time discussing the rationale for, and description of, the treatment. This will help to ensure a collaborative approach to what is potentially a difficult and painful process.

There are several ways of explaining imaginal exposure treatment. Some clients will want to know the theoretical underpinnings of the intervention, while others may find an explanation of the process in everyday language, or with the use of a metaphor, more helpful. It is important to reassure clients that they will not forget what happened and that it will always be an upsetting memory. The goal of treatment is to be able to remember the experience without becoming very distressed.

The following discussion explains the theoretical underpinnings of imaginal exposure, adapted from Foa and Rothbaum (1998)[1].

1. Emotional Processing. Traumatic memories are often confused and fragmented. Through the exposure treatment, you will go over the traumatic incident again and again. This helps to organise the memories and make sense of the experience. It is like “putting the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together”. By repeatedly confronting the memories, the link between your memory and the distressing emotions will be weakened.

2. Habituation. During the exposure treatment, you will confront the distressing memories repeatedly and for sustained periods of time. Through this process, your anxiety will decrease. This reduction over repeated confrontations will disconfirm any belief you may have that your anxiety will last "forever" and that you may lose control or “go crazy ” if you engage with the traumatic memories rather than avoiding them.

3. Discrimination between remembering and being retraumatised. PTSD sufferers often feel that remembering the trauma is the same as actually being back in the traumatic event, Repeated exposure to your traumatic memory will help you realise that remembering the trauma is not the same as being traumatised again. Remembering the trauma is distressing, but it is not dangerous whereas being in the traumatic event is dangerous. As you come to understand this, your anxiety will decrease.

4. Increased mastery. People with PTSD often feel out of control and at the mercy of their re-experiencing and avoidance cycle of symptoms. The process of confronting your traumatic memories through exposure, and the accompanying drop in distress, will enhance your sense of self-control and personal competence. You will feel progressively better about yourself as you stop avoiding and begin mastering your fears.

5. Differentiation. Over time, if untreated, the fear associated with a traumatic experience can spread to other similar situations, activities, or objects which are actually safe. In this way, the number and range of situations or objects that lead to fear and avoidance steadily increase. Confronting the traumatic memory through exposure will decrease this generalisation of fear.

[1] Foa, E. and Rothbaum, B. (1998) Treating the Trauma of Rape: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for PTSD. New York: Guilford.

Many clients find a metaphor useful in understanding the rationale and process of imaginal exposure therapy. You may wish to use one of the following examples, or adapt an explanation from these that suits your individual client.

“Often after a trauma we try to block out memories of what happened. It is as if we want to pack the memories away in a box. We then use our strength and energy to keep the lid tightly closed and we try to leave the memory undisturbed. However, over time, two things happen. Firstly, our strength begins to wane and it becomes more of an effort to keep the box sealed. Secondly, due to the pressure, the box begins to lose its shape and small cracks begin to appear. What we experience as symptoms (such as memories of the trauma, and having nightmares and disturbed sleep) is like the content of the box spilling out through these cracks. This is usually very frightening, so we try to avoid anything that reminds us of the trauma and use up even more effort to keep the box closed. We try to avoid thinking and talking about what happened and how we felt. In this way the content of the box becomes a “ghost” which we have learned to fear. As part of therapy, we are going to open the box and inspect the content for what it really is. In this way we can talk through what happened and how you felt. We will be inspecting the “ghosts” that have been created and throwing away any unhelpful and distressing beliefs you may have about the event. We find that once the trauma has been dealt with in this manner the symptoms become much less severe and less frequent.”

Another analogy talks about the dentist:

"When dentists work on a decayed tooth, they don't just lay the filling on top of the decay. If they did, it may be fine for a few weeks or months, but the problems would keep coming back as the tooth continued to deteriorate. Instead, they spend some time drilling and scraping, cleaning out all the decay before putting the tooth back together. This is a very unpleasant and painful process, but we know it is worth going through this short term pain for the long term gain. Traumatic memories are a bit like tooth decay. We need to make sure that we have confronted all aspects of the trauma before we try to put the event behind us. This involves giving ourselves time to face up to even the worst parts of the experience. Like the dentist's drilling, it is a painful process but an important part of recovery".

A final analogy comes from the work of Edna Foa, one of the leading experts in the treatment of PTSD:

"Suppose you have eaten a very large and heavy meal that you are unable to digest. This causes an uncomfortable feeling and you will experience symptoms such as stomach cramps, fever, or diarrhoea. But when you have digested the food, you feel a great sense of relief and the symptoms will diminish. Flashbacks, nightmares, and troublesome thoughts are symptoms that occur because the traumatic event has not been adequately digested. Prolonged exposure treatment will help you start digesting your traumatic memories so that the PTSD symptoms will diminish and will stop interfering with your daily life".