

Handout 1

Rationale for Treatment by Prolonged Exposure

The treatment program you are participating in is called *prolonged exposure* (PE). Exposure in this sense means facing thoughts, feelings, or situations that are usually avoided because they trigger distress. There are two main parts to this program.

The first is *imaginal exposure*, in which you revisit the trauma memory repeatedly in your mind. The second part is *in vivo exposure*, in which you confront safe or low-risk situations that you have been avoiding after your trauma. Many people who have experienced a trauma try to avoid thoughts and feelings associated with that event. Similarly, many people also avoid situations, places, and activities that remind them of the trauma or that just feel scary. However, while avoiding can make you feel more comfortable in the short run, it actually can make the problem worse in the long run because it prevents you from overcoming your fears. Imaginal and in vivo exposures address these problems and work in similar ways.

How does exposure work? When you confront feared memories or situations in a systematic way under relatively safe circumstances, several things happen.

1. Revisiting the memory helps you to emotionally process the traumatic experience and make sense of it.
2. You learn that thinking about a traumatic experience is not dangerous and that being upset or anxious is not dangerous.
3. You become less fearful of other situations that remind you of your trauma.
4. You learn that you can handle your distress, and you feel better about yourself.
5. Finally, you learn that when you repeatedly confront memories or situations you have avoided, the fear and distress gradually decrease. In other words, you again become relatively comfortable in these situations. We call this *habituation*, which is the process by which anxiety comes down on its own. When you stick it out and stay in a frightening but safe situation for a long enough time, and you go back to that same situation often enough, you simply become less frightened of this situation. In a way, it is similar to getting back on a bicycle after falling off. If you refuse to try again, over time you become more and more frightened of riding bicycles. But if you get back on and ride your bicycle despite your fear, you become less and less afraid until the fear is reduced.

Habituation works with frightening memories, too. Letting yourself engage in the traumatic memories rather than avoiding them will allow you to remember the trauma with less distress, and you will learn that the memories are not dangerous. Exposure to the painful memories (i.e., revisiting the trauma in imagination) also allows you to gain control over them so they will be less likely to pop up at times when you do not want them to. The flashbacks, nightmares, and

intrusive thoughts that many trauma survivors often experience are less likely to occur after you repeatedly revisit the trauma memories, and, when they do occur, they are less upsetting.

Following a trauma, people's beliefs about themselves and about the world may change in basic ways. You may view situations as dangerous when, before the trauma, such situations would not have bothered you at all. You may find that your attitude toward people and the world in general has become more negative than it used to be or that your self-image has gotten worse. Many times these changes reflect trauma-related changes in your thinking. Sometimes even the presence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may cause you to think and feel negatively about yourself. Because how you think about yourself, the world, and other people affects how you feel, it is useful to pay attention to how the traumatic experience has shaped your thoughts and beliefs. For this reason, as you go through the treatment, you and your therapist will discuss how you think about the trauma, yourself, other people, and situations in your life. You will sometimes explore trauma-related changes in your thinking and see how such changes affect your feelings and whether they are helpful or not.

Treatment by imaginal and in vivo exposure may seem difficult at first, and many trauma survivors are afraid of becoming involved in it. But, with time, you will find that this treatment is challenging and makes you feel good about yourself. Congratulations! You have made the very scary first step in taking back control of your life! You will be glad you did!