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Exposure Hierarchy and SUDS: Addressing Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder

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Exposure Hierarchy and SUDS: Addressing Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder

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Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS) and Exposure Hierarchy

Description of Intervention

The Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS) is a rating scale used to measure the intensity of symptoms related to anxiety and social anxiety (Cunic, 2020). It is modified to a 0-10 scale with 0 representing a state of calm and 10 extreme, unbearable anxiety. Using the scale and outline from the *C.A.T. Project Manual*, clients develop an Exposure Hierarchy comprised of different social events or situations that are avoided due to varying degrees of anxiety and fear (Kendall, et al., 2006). The goal is to methodically work through situations with lower distress ratings while developing skills in mindfulness and grounding to cope with the symptoms of anxious distress. Overall, the intervention aims to assist the client in various ways to ultimately move through the entire hierarchy, including the most distressing event.

Review of Research

Studies on the use of exposure hierarchies and SUDS have supported their inclusion as evidence-based practice in the treatment of GAD and SAD. Katerelos, et al. (2008) conducted a study that concluded “the exposure hierarchy demonstrated high test-retest reliability, as well as significant convergent validity” and “ratings were significantly associated with changes in... symptoms over time” (p. 504). *The C.A.T. Project Manual for the Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Anxious Adolescents* utilizes exposure hierarchies as one of the main tools used in reducing the severity of symptoms associated with GAD (Kendall, et al., 2006). They are used in tandem with training in mindfulness and grounding techniques, emotion identification and regulation, and social support (i.e., family).

Therapist Application & Client Response

The therapist provided psychoeducation about each piece of the intervention and regularly checked in with the client. The client actively engaged in each session, asked questions, and completed assigned homework. Using the skills developed in session, she successfully engaged in a level 6 social event (birthday party).

Clinical Issues Addressed

According to the DSM-5, the client met diagnostic criteria for both Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

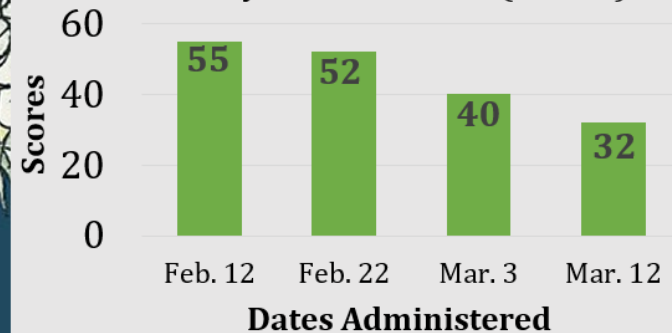
- Excessive anxiety and worry (i.e., school)
- Difficulty controlling worry
- Restless, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension (i.e., shoulder pain)

Social Anxiety Disorder:

- Consistent fear and anxiety about most social situations and negative evaluation
- Regularly avoids social interactions or nears level of panic attacks; ongoing 2+ years



Outcome Scores of Clinically Useful Anxiety Outcome Scale (CUXOS)



References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Association.
- Cunic, A. (2020, September 17). *How the SUDS Rating Scale Is Used to Measure Social Anxiety*. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-suds-rating-3024471>.
- Health Resources & Services Administration. (2021). *Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS)*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Katerelos, M., Hawley, L. L., Antony, M. M., & McCabe, R. E. (2008). The Exposure Hierarchy as a Measure of Progress and Efficacy in the Treatment of Social Anxiety Disorder. *Behavior Modification*, 32(4), 504-518. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445507309302>
- Kendall, P. C., Choudhury, M., Hudson, J., & Webb, A. (2006). *The C.A.T. Project Manual for the Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Anxious Adolescents*. Temple University.