
Treating Perfectionism: Behavioral Strategies

Perfectionism centers around the belief that everything must be perfect all of the time. People with perfectionism can be resistant to change, because they consider their perfectionism to be a strength that aids them in their tasks. However, upon digging deeper, they may unearth the realization that perfectionism yields a number of problems, like stress, anxiety, procrastination, and depression. Below are a list of techniques to utilize with perfectionistic clients using a CBT framework.

Behavioral Strategies:

Overview of Steps

- Identify belief to be tested
- Brainstorm possible experiments collaboratively
- Elicit predictions and design a method to assess the outcome
- Anticipate problems and brainstorm solutions
- Conduct the experiment
- Review the experiment (and predictions) and draw conclusions

Variables to Manipulate

- Testing the effects of exposure to a feared thought, symptom, object, or situation (e.g., breaking a rule; behaving imperfectly; giving a presentation)
- Testing the effects of preventing safety behaviors
- Testing the effects of using safety behaviors (e.g., holding a glass very tightly; averting eye contact) or avoiding a situation

Behavioral Experiments

- Target Cognition: I must always be busy. It is wrong not to be busy. I could not tolerate being idle.
 - Alternative Perspective: It's okay to be idle sometimes.
 - Experiment: Work with the client to find an experiment that will challenge them.
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Exposure-Based Strategies

Background

- From a learning perspective, fears are thought to often develop through classical conditioning (pairing a neutral stimulus with an aversive stimulus).
- Exposure therapy does not lead to the association being erased, but rather to an inhibition of the association.
- After the extinction of a feared response, an individual remains vulnerable to a return of fear, given certain conditions.

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Exposure Hierarchy Example for Perfectionism and Social Anxiety

No.	Situation	Fear (0-100)
1	Give a formal presentation about unfamiliar material in front of people I don't know well	99
2	Throw a party for people from work and prepare an unfamiliar dish	85
3	Purposely forget my wallet when in line at the store	85
4	Ask someone to repeat themselves in a meeting	75
5	Show up for a haircut on the wrong day	60
6	Have lunch with a coworker and allow uncomfortable silences	50
7	Answer a question in my night class	45
8	Forget my ticket when I pick up my dry cleaning	40

Additional Examples of In Vivo Exposures (Looking Imperfect)

- Work out in front of others
- Say something incorrect
- Spill a drink
- Talk about unfamiliar topics
- Ask for help in a store
- Drop something in front of others
- Make a mistake in public

Prevention of Safety Behaviors

Safety Behaviors

- Lead individuals to predict that the feared outcome is less likely to occur, thereby reducing the discrepancy between what is predicted and what actually occurs.
- Reduction in the use of safety behaviors during exposure therapy is associated with more symptom reduction in people with social anxiety disorder.
- Judicious use of safety behaviors during early exposures may make treatment more tolerable.

Examples of Safety Behaviors

- Wearing a turtleneck to hide blushing
- Making an excuse to leave a party early
- Avoiding eye contact
- Memorizing a presentation
- Avoiding certain topics of conversation
- Having several glasses of wine
- Dimming the lights at dinner

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Removal of Safety Behaviors

- May include people, objects, places, situations, or internal states
- Safety signals are thought to reduce anxiety in the short term, but when they are no longer present, the fear returns
- Generally, safety behaviors should be eliminated completely or gradually phased out over the course of treatment
- Findings regarding the impact of safety behaviors on outcome of exposure are mixed (not all studies show that safety behaviors interfere with treatment outcome)

When to Use Safety Behaviors

- Specific strategies (e.g., breathing retraining, cognitive strategies) may act as safety behaviors under certain circumstances
- Depends on the function of the behavior (e.g., to prevent feared outcomes vs. to increase mastery or coping)
- Depends on the timing (early in treatment vs. late in treatment)

Variability

- Variability in exposure practices leads to better outcomes
 - Gradually increase the length of time between practices
 - Increase variability in fear levels during exposures
 - Conduct exposure to hierarchy items in random order (preliminary research supports this approach)
 - Ensure variability in the stimuli used during exposure

Multiple Contexts

- Fear can be reinstated more easily when an individual encounters a feared object in a context that is different from the context in which exposure practices occurred
- Best to vary the context of exposure practices
 - Different places
 - Alone vs. accompanied
 - Different times of day
 - Different days of the week

Behavioral Activation

Important for Clients Who

- Spend a lot of time doing nothing
- Procrastinate
- Feel overwhelmed with even small things they need to do
- Have significant suicidal ideation

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Background

- Involves increasing activity levels or changing the balance between mastery and pleasure activities in a person's life
 - Mastery - a sense of accomplishment
 - Pleasure - a sense of enjoyment

Rationale for Behavioral Activation

- Illustrate the reinforcement cycle in depression and how withdrawal from an active life prevents reinforcement from the environment
- Propose that behavioral activities can be added on an experimental basis

Scheduling and Recording Activities

- Client schedules each day on diary
- Mood is recorded throughout the day

Outcomes

- Demonstrate that the client's mood varies across situations
- Illustrate how variations in mood are tied systematically to activities

Identifying Activities to Add

- Draw from the client's desires, plans, hopes, or past
- Use standard scales:
 - Pleasant Events List (66 items; Egan et al., 2014; additional worksheet on Resource page)

Next Steps in Behavioral Activation

- Add a balance of mastery and pleasure activities in a graduated fashion
- Gradually expand frequency and scope of mastery and pleasure activities
- Take into account both short-term and long-term goals when adding activities
- Select activities that are likely to be reinforced by the environment