Short term therapeutic programme for test anxiety

Marc Ophalvens
Odisee Co-Hogeschool - Belgium
**Short term fast acting exposure program**

**What is it about**

A good deal of the students suffer from test anxiety. As students always have exams or test at least within two or three months after registration it is very important to offer them a short term counseling which works effectively.

**What will participants learn from the session**

The participants will learn to focus more on the core of the test anxiety and they will be able to handle 80% of test-anxiety student cases within 3 to 5 sessions or even less. They will learn how to work with the basic working factor in anxiety treatment i.c. exposure.

---

**Psycho-education**

- One psycho-education *group* session (exceptionally individual session).
- Duration: **2 hours**.
- Students are given an overview of *powerful behavioral advises*.
- The behavioral advises *only work in combination*.
- Without the central *exposure* component no treatment will help.
- Our lecture is structured by the behavioral advises that we use.
- Sometimes one or some extra individual sessions are needed.
- *Reassurance does not work for anxiety* !!

**Limitations**:

- multiple complex problems
- Autism
- When the overall self-esteem is below zero
The core of the test anxiety in terms of self-confidence

+ Can I be confident that in the worst case I will be able to handle / to cope with that situation. Can I have enough faith to hold on to.

+ If not = disaster scenario as I see it (I cannot imagine having a life then...
  = the core of the test anxiety
  = the fear will overwhelm you

+ Lies far beyond in the future

1. The worst case scenario = Exposure

+ Determine the worst case
+ Imagine the worst case
+ Determine your plan B scenario
  look for concrete possibilities to overcome this situation and imagine your life in such a situation Take the first week 10 to 15 minutes a day to do this exercise
  + It should be very concrete
    + For what jobs would you apply
    + From which activities you will get satisfaction

+ Special attention for the social dimension
+ Name the plan B scenario
2. Attitude towards the exam (self-talk)

- I go for it, I give the best of myself and if I fail, then so be it (Exposure).
- Always make the link with the possible final worst case scenario (Exposure)
- ... and if it ends up by the XXX-scenario, so be it (you never know)

3. Coping with the negative thoughts

- Consider your thoughts as thoughts and not as facts.
  If you think e.g. “I will fail tomorrow” or “I’m stupid to make such difficult exercises”, you don’t have to see this as the truth..., you can just consider it as a stupid/irrelevant/anxiety related thought, a thought that needs no attention.
- Eventually (but not standard): Rational emotive questioning (“I know I will fail”...)
- Exposure

Be aware of !!
the thoughts are conditioned responses, the are being evoked/provoked automatically. So even if you have a worst case scenario that is not enough. The worst case scenario has to be associated with possible stimuli that evoke ruminative thinking
### 4. Goal-setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral targets</th>
<th>Result targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What can I do in concrete terms = how much time will I spent?</td>
<td>What I wish, hope, desire... to reach (Realistic ?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TYPE A : Thoroughly working as a behavioral objective</strong></td>
<td><strong>= Quantity as a result target</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. I will work two hours (summarize,...) and see how far I can get</td>
<td>e.g. I can hope to have done about 10 pages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= emphasis on in-depth study / quality</td>
<td><strong>= Thoroughness as a result objective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TYPE B : Rapid working as a behavioral objective</strong></td>
<td>e.g. I hope that I know the 20 pages just enough to succeed,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. I will go through 20 pages (or 100 pages) in two hours</td>
<td>Can I be satisfied with what I have reached ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= emphasis on quantity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I be satisfied with what I have done ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4. Goal-setting**

+ Every time you study you define your **Behavioral goal:**
  + how much time (in hours) will I spend now on subject/course X? 
  + What will I do, what is my concrete strategy of working (read / underline / make a summary / make blocks / exercises /<<...)

+ Every time you study you make a **choice:** either type A either type B

+ In case of type B: define how much you will have done and stick to this

+ Learn more and more as exams come closer to work with type B behavioral goals (the only option in exam periods)
5. Make a concrete planning for studying your exams

➢ Make a concrete **planning** for studying your exams
  ➢ = divide your available study time (in days) over your different courses

➢ and **stick to this planning** by working with type-B goals

**Extra:** define your **best exam strategy** (especially for when a question is very difficult)

---

6. Mindfullness (optional)

You can exercise “focusing” via a basic attention-meditation exercise:

➢ focusing your attention on your breathing and stay there.

➢ Every time you notice that your attention is distracted by your thoughts you bring your attention gently back to your breathing

➢ Decide before you begin how long you will do the exercise
7. General attitude of confidence

Activate your pride and your strength

= Make a fist and link it with a strong mental mantra:
   I go for it
   I’ ll give the best of myself
   I do what I can

Note: Self talk

+ Exposure self-talk
  + I do my very best but I know that I have a risk to fail, if so so be it (I’ ll be able to deal with it)

+ Positive self-talk
  + I can do this / I’ m smart and capable...

+ Negative self-talk
  + I know I will fail

+ Reassurance self-talk
  + It’ ll work out on the exam

+ Must self-talk
  + I must do good on this test !!!