

Treating Social Anxiety with Exposure: Considerations for Children and Adolescents

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Learning Objectives

Identify

Identify the evidence base and theoretical framework for exposure therapy in children and adolescents.



Develop

Develop age-appropriate exposure hierarchies and treatment plans for social anxiety in youth.



Apply

Apply strategies to increase engagement, manage avoidance, and collaborate with caregivers in the treatment of social anxiety in youth.

Assessments for Adolescents and Children

Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED)- Ages 8-18

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents (LSAS-CA) 7-18

Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised (SASC-R) Ages 8-15

Severity Measure for Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia) (SMSAD)- Ages 11-17

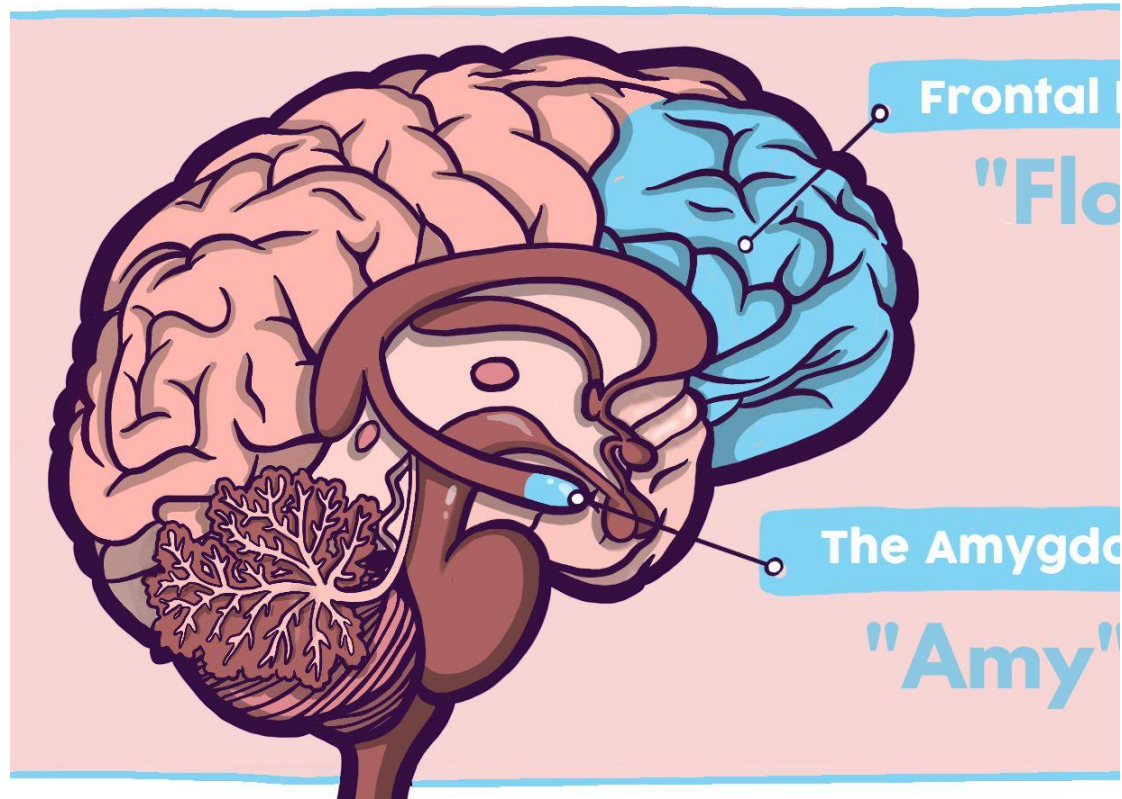
Spence Preschool Anxiety Scale (SPAS) Ages ~2.5-6.5

Kinds of Exposure for Social Anxiety

- In-Vivo Exposure: "In vivo" translates to "in real life" or "within the living".
- Imaginal Exposure: Vividly imagining feared social scenarios in detail.
- Flooding Exposure: Directly exposing individuals to their most feared social situations all at once, rather than gradually.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Exposure

- Things to consider:
 - Habituation
 - Extinction
 - The Fear Response



The Role of Cognitive Restructuring in Conjunction with Exposure

- Cognitive restructuring enhances exposure
 - Identifying and challenging negative thoughts
 - Developing rational counter-arguments
 - Reframing thoughts
 - Improving coping skills
 - Psychoeducation

Why Exposure Still Feels Scary to Clinicians

- Therapist Fears: “What if I make it worse?”
- Misconceptions:
 - Exposure = flooding
 - Exposure– forcing kids
 - Exposure = traumatic

Why Focus on Social Anxiety

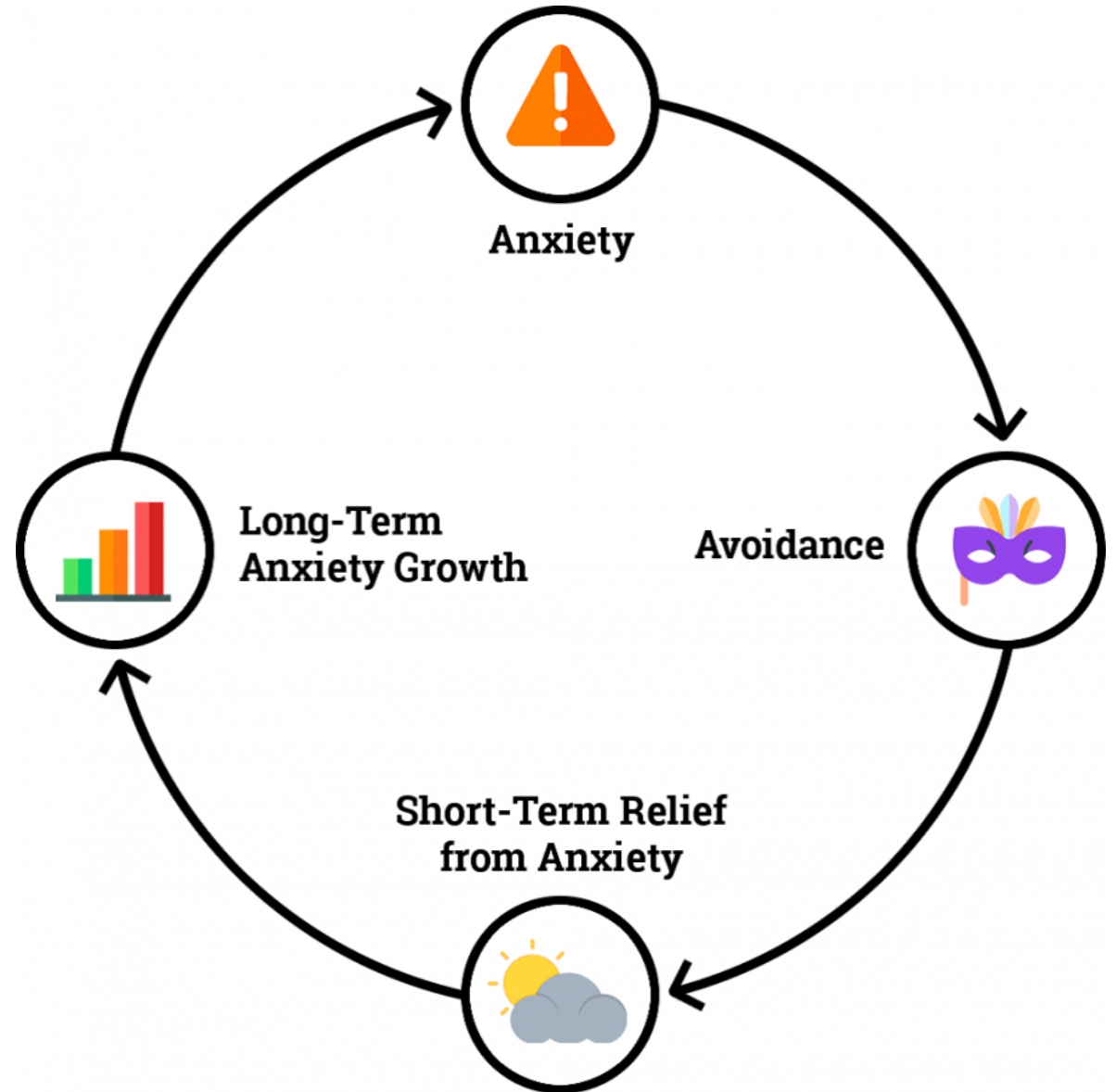
- Most Common anxiety disorder in youth
- Early onset -→ chronic impairment if untreated
- Strong evidence base for CBT + exposure

What Makes Social Anxiety Unique

- Fear of evaluation/rejection
- Heavy reliance on avoidance and safety behaviors
- School = constant exposure environment

The Social Anxiety Cycle

- Trigger → Threat prediction → Anxiety → Avoidance/Safety behaviors → Short-term relief → Long-term maintenance



Developmental Differences

- Young Children (6-9)
 - Fear of speaking to adults
 - Separation from caregivers
 - Performance fears (like reading aloud)
- Tweens (10-12)
 - Peer evaluation increases
 - Friendship dynamics
 - School performance/social comparison
- Adolescents (13-18)
 - Identity + peer acceptance
 - Dating/social status
 - Online/social media fears

Safety Behaviors

- Avoiding eye contact
- Rehearsing sentences
- Speaking quietly or choosing not to speak
- Phone checking
- Staying close to “safe” peers

Why Exposure Works: Two Primary Models

- Habituation model (old):
 - Anxiety must decrease during exposure.
- Inhibitory learning model (current):
 - Exposure works by:
 - Violating expectations (what the child expects does not happen)
 - Building new learning
 - Increasing tolerance of uncertainty

Habituation vs. Inhibitory Learning Model

Fear learning is like a loud alarm.

Habituation model:

Turn the volume down.

Inhibitory learning model:

Add a new message: “False alarm”

What Kids Actually Learn

- Exposure teaches:
- “I can handle anxiety.”
- “My predictions aren’t always true.”
- “Anxiety decreases without avoidance.”
- “I don’t need safety behaviors.”



Key Mechanisms to Highlight

Expectancy
violation

Distress
tolerance

Self-
efficacy

Cognitive
flexibility

The Therapeutic Alliance

Build Rapport

- Ensure that the client feels comfortable and understood. It's important to create a safe space for them to discuss their fears or anxieties openly.

Explain the Purpose

- Educate the client and the parent on the rationale behind exposure therapy. Let them know that confronting feared situations in a gradual way helps anxiety become more manageable and improve their ability to cope with social situations.

The Role of Consent

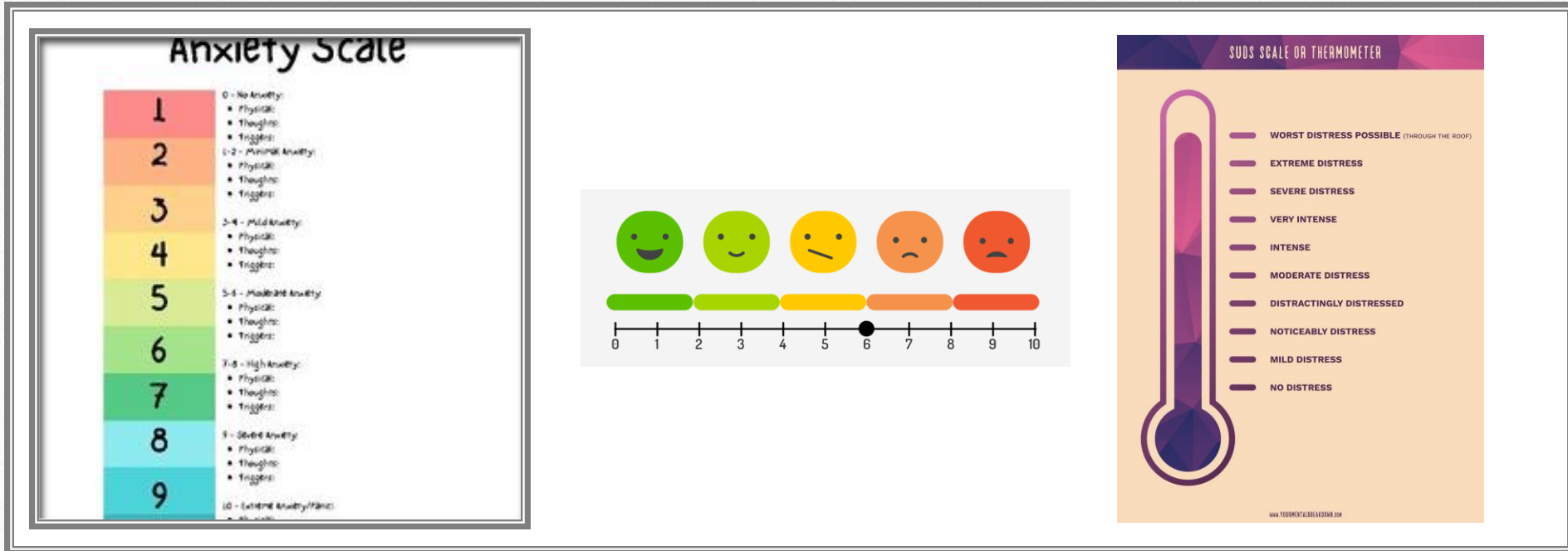
- Consent is important for trust to flourish. Allow the client control over their own limits and engage them in each step of the exposure process. This allows the client to build ownership over their fear and gain control and autonomy over their own actions (and reactions).

Designing a Hierarchy: Identify the Fear Structure

- Situations
- Thoughts/predictions
- Safety behaviors
- Avoidance patterns
- Situational reinforcement (family, friends, teachers)

Design a Hierarchy: Write Exposure Targets Properly

- Bad exposure:
 - “Talk to people”
- Good exposure:
 - “Ask a classmate what homework they got.”
 - “Order food without a parent speaking.”
 - “Attend a gathering with your phone turned off.”



Child-Friendly SUDS Scaling

Design a Hierarchy: Building the Ladder

- Start low to mid-range
- Frequent repetition is needed during treatment and should continue beyond treatment
- Remove safety behaviors gradually
- Increase variability
- Exposure is practice, not a one-time event.

Design a Hierarchy: Types of Social Exposures

Performance exposures (performing while being watched/critiqued)

Interaction exposures (talking with others)

Assertion exposures (standing up for yourself)

Being observed

Making mistakes intentionally

Don't Forget to Debrief

- Post-exposure discussion is critical.
- Ask:
 - What did you predict would happen?
 - What actually happened?
 - What did you learn?
 - What surprised you?

Common Therapist Pitfalls

- Going too easy → no learning
- Going too hard → overwhelm
- Allowing safety behaviors
- Over-reassurance
- Not including the caregivers

Parents as Exposure Coaches

- It's important to teach parents to:
 - Stop accommodating avoidance
 - Praise bravery, not outcomes
 - Model approach behavior
 - (Sometimes parents may need therapy to treat their own social anxiety)

Considerations for Exposure with Children

Motivation

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graph TD; A[Motivation] --> B[Trust]; B --> C[SUD Scale (1-10)]; C --> D[Parent Involvement];
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Trust

SUD Scale (1-10)

Parent Involvement

Increasing Engagement with Kids

- Gamify exposures
- “Bravery points”
- Rewards systems
- Collaborative language: *bravery practice*

Common Challenges During Exposure

Avoidance or refusal to engage in exposure tasks.

Addressing cognitive distortions and barriers to exposure (e.g., catastrophizing, overestimation of danger).

When trust is broken

Using motivational interviewing techniques to explore ambivalence.

Design Your Own Exposure Plan!

- **Step 1 — Brainstorm Exposure Ideas**
Generate as many exposures as possible.
- **Step 2 — Rank by SUDS**
Create a ladder from easiest → hardest.
- **Step 3 — Plan One Exposure**
Include:
 - Target fear prediction
 - Safety behaviors to drop
 - Reward/celebration plan
 - Parent involvement

Questions?

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