

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY: PHOBIAS

Outline and evaluate the behavioural approach to treating phobias

The behavioural approach to treating phobias works on the idea that the behaviour was learnt, therefore can be reconditioned to remove the phobia response. One way is through the use of systematic desensitisation (SD) which is a treatment based on classical conditioning. SD uses a fear hierarchy, relaxation techniques and reciprocal inhibition in its treatment process. It places the phobia at the top of the hierarchy and alongside relaxation techniques, teaches people how to gradually deal with the anxiety associated with their phobia. It also claims that reciprocal inhibition is important, this is the idea that two conflicting emotional states cannot exist at the same time, so it is impossible to feel anxious and relaxed at the same time. Therefore, if you are taught to associate relaxation with the fear, you will not be able to experience anxiety at the same time. SD uses reverse conditioning to unlearn maladaptive responses to a situation or object, using relaxation. People start at the bottom of the fear hierarchy, remaining relaxed in the presence of the phobic stimulus before gradually progressing onto the next stage. Systematic desensitisation is a type of gradual exposure therapy.

Systematic desensitisation is a very ethical way of treating patients with phobias, they have a say throughout the process and only tackle a new stage of the hierarchy when they feel ready to do so.

McGrath et al (1990) found that 75% of patients with phobias were successfully treated using systematic desensitisation. Also, **Gilroy et al (2002)** who examined 42 patients with arachnophobia (fear of spiders), found SD effective even 33 months later. This shows that it works as a behavioural approach to treating phobias. However, some psychologists argue that systematic desensitisation is not effective in treating all phobias, like the fear of heights. Nevertheless, is often thought to be more successful than flooding.

In contrast, another behavioural approach is to use a technique known as flooding. Flooding is a more extreme behavioural therapy for phobias. In flooding a person is exposed to the most frightening situation immediately, so a person with a phobia of dogs would be placed in a room with a dog and be asked to interact with the dog straight away. Flooding can take one of two forms; in vivo (actual exposure), or in vitro (imaginary exposure). In some cases, without the option to avoid the phobia, flooding can work quickly. Some would argue the method is too unethical and puts patients in a state of increased anxiety. **Schumacher et al (2015)** found that patients and therapists rated flooding as significantly more stressful than SD.

The behavioural approach to treating phobias fails to account for individual differences in how people experience emotion and process their thoughts about the phobic stimulus. For this cognitive therapies may be more effective. Despite this, studies have shown that SD can have positive effects with people with learning difficulties, as they struggle with cognitive therapies. Moreover, **Persons (1986)** argues that behavioural therapies only mask the symptoms, they do not treat the underlying issues. However, when treating phobias, behavioural therapies have been shown to be very effective in changing how people respond to their phobia and have helped people go on to live success lives, free of fear.

