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Psychological approaches in the treatment of specific phobias: A meta-analysis

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Abstract

Data from 33 randomized treatment studies were subjected to a meta-analysis to address questions surrounding the efficacy of psychological approaches in the treatment of specific phobia. As expected, exposure-based treatment produced large effects sizes relative to no treatment. They also outperformed placebo conditions and alternative active psychotherapeutic approaches. Treatments involving *in vivo* contact with the phobic target also outperformed alternative modes of exposure (e.g., imaginal exposure, virtual reality, etc.) at post-treatment but not at follow-up. Placebo treatments were significantly more effective than no treatment suggesting that specific phobia sufferers are moderately responsive to placebo interventions. Multi-session treatments marginally outperformed single-session treatments on domain-specific questionnaire measures of phobic dysfunction, and moderator analyses revealed that more sessions predicted more favorable outcomes. Contrary to expectation, effect sizes for the major comparisons of

interest were not moderated by type of specific phobia. These findings provide the first quantitative summary evidence supporting the superiority of exposure-based treatments over alternative treatment approaches for those presenting with specific phobia. Recommendations for future research are also discussed.



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Keywords

Specific phobia; Meta-analysis; Exposure treatment

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[†] Portions of these data were previously presented at the 2005 annual meeting of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies.

¹ Currently at the University of Amsterdam.

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