

A Translational Study of the Mechanisms of Exposure Therapy for Obsessions: Fear Tolerance vs. Habituation

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Despite the efficacy of exposure and response prevention (ERP) for OCD, patients who experience primarily obsessions about sexual, violent, and immoral/religious content are at heightened risk of attenuated outcomes and the return of fear. The current study seeks to translate laboratory research on inhibitory learning to the use of ERP for unacceptable obsessions with the long-term aim of maximizing outcome and reducing the need for follow-up services for this at-risk group of patients. Specifically, this work will empirically test the widely held, but recently challenged, assumption that habituation of anxiety during exposure is necessary for fear extinction and symptom improvement. While preliminary research suggests that learning to tolerate elevated fear during exposure therapy enhances outcomes for some anxiety-related problems, no studies have examined this in the treatment of unacceptable obsessions. Thus, we will compare ERP using the conventional habituation framework (i.e., emphasizing fear *reduction*) to a novel ERP protocol emphasizing *tolerance* of anxiety, obsessional thoughts, and uncertainty. We will examine both immediate and delayed treatment outcomes, as well as therapeutic processes and mechanisms. The findings from this study could provide evidence that leads to optimizing ERP (by enhancing fear extinction) for patients with a particularly challenging manifestation of OCD.

Key words: Obsessive-compulsive disorder; exposure and response prevention; fear tolerance; inhibitory learning; habituation