In Vivo Exposure: Mastering Traumatic Memories

- Two-pronged process: Trauma Narrative and In Vivo Exposure

- **In Vivo Exposure**: gradually combating the avoidance of innocuous trauma cues (e.g., the dark, school), in cases where avoidance interferes with optimal development.

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In Vivo Exposure

- Conducted only with avoidance of innocuous cues and **not** in situations where avoidance of cues is adaptive.

- Requires an initial leap of faith for therapist, parent, and child.

- Fears develop for a reason, but once the child is safe, fears interfere with the normal developmental trajectory.
Avoidance

Exposure-Avoidance vs. Habituation
Avoidance

- Powerfully self-reinforcing
- The best way to get over avoidance is through *not* avoiding
- When exposed to feared situation doesn’t result in feared consequence, anxiety diminishes
- Old Adage: You fall off the horse, get back on….
How do you do it?

1. Find out as much as you can about the feared situation

2. Get ‘buy in’ and involvement from key participants: parents, school personnel, etc.

3. Develop a plan that eases the child into facing the feared cues
   - Make it specific and include rewards

4. Plan should progressively increase exposure

Test drive: Developing a Plan for In Vivo Exposure

Cedric, a 13 y.o. male, was sexually abused by his father for 4 years, and the abuse often occurred in the shower. As a result, Cedric is very avoidant of showering and therefore has significant problems with hygiene. His difficulties with personal hygiene have resulted in problems with his peers.

- Note: Cedric is safe—he is no longer in the home.
- What in vivo plan might help Cedric?
Test drive: Developing a Plan for In Vivo Exposure

- Angie, a 9 year old girl, has a well developed fear of the dark due to sexual abuse that occurred in her dark bedroom for a prolonged period of time. She wants to spend the night with others and go to slumber parties but finds she is too afraid.
- What in vivo plan might help Angie?

Practice Components

- P: Psychoeducation and parenting skills
- R: Relaxation
- A: Affective expression and regulation
- C: Cognitive coping
- T: Trauma narrative development & processing
- I: In vivo gradual exposure
- C: Joint parent child sessions
- E: Enhancing safety and future development
What are Personal Safety Skills?

- Skills that are taught and practiced in order to prepare children for future risky situations
  - Assertiveness
  - Problem solving
  - Self-protection
  - Discernment of healthy boundaries
  - Discernment of risky situations and people

Why Personal Safety Skills Training is Important

- Teaching these skills increases children’s awareness of unsafe situations, thereby minimizing risk of exposure (Prevention)

- Some evidence that children who have this type of training are more likely to use self-protection techniques and to disclose victimization attempts *

- There are opportunities for non-offending parents to get involved in training kids about safety issues, which have been shown to be helpful for kids.

- Increases problem solving and assertiveness skills, facilitates general healthy development of self

When to Introduce Personal Safety Skills in the Model

- For most kids, the TF-CBT model recommends that it be introduced after the trauma narrative to cut down on any unwanted guilt or “socially desirable” responses.
- Sometimes has to occur early in treatment when children are currently unsafe (e.g., DV in home).
- Introducing some safety skills early in the model can facilitate engagement in treatment process.

Personal Safety Skills

- Assertiveness & Problem Solving
  - Right to say no
  - Confident body language
  - Telling someone/Not keeping secrets
  - Emergency alert
Personal Safety Skills

- Self-Protection
  - Getting away
  - Self-defense skills

- Discernment of healthy boundaries
  - Body ownership and awareness
  - OK vs. not-OK touches and interactions
  - Healthy sexuality and sexual behavior problems
Personal Safety Skills

- Discernment of risky situations and people
  - Uh-oh feelings
  - Internet
  - Family or peer violence
  - Perpetrator tricks
  - Dating and sexual relations
  - Substance abuse
  - Risky car situations
  - Bullying
  - Gangs
Group Activity

- Discuss your experiences with teaching personal safety skills and share successes, challenges, and resources

Resources

- It Happened to Me Video (video.google.com)
- I Am the Boss of My Body: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse DVD (http://store.discoveryeducation.com/product/show/51167)
- It’s Not OK: Let’s Talk About Domestic Violence (1996)
  (It’s Not OK: Let’s Talk About Domestic Violence (1996); 8 ½ minutes; $15.00; Produced by the ABA Commission of Domestic Violence, in partnership with the Walt Disney Company. It’s Not OK is a video for professionals working with children who experience domestic violence. The video is hosted by Ben Savage, star of the TV program “Boy Meets World.” The video narrates several children’s experiences of domestic violence and ends with a safety-planning segment designed to teach children how to respond safely to domestic violence. To order a publication or video from the ABA Commission on Domestic Violence, please contact the American Bar Association Service Center at (800)-285-2221 or email Maria DelRosario-Martin at martinm@abanet.org)
- The Safe Touching Coloring Book
  (http://www.childtherapytoys.com/store/product5188.html)