

1999

# Flooding

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## Recommended Citation

Bufford, Rodger K., "Flooding" (1999). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 294.  
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**Flooding.** A behavioral approach used in elimination of unwanted fears or phobias. In flooding the client either is directly exposed to or imagines highly frightening events in a protected setting. Presumably the fear-inducing stimuli will lose their influence once the individual is fully exposed to them and discovers that no harm occurs. Following a discussion of the person's fears, the person is then asked to imagine the most feared situation. The therapist describes the salient fearful elements to enhance visualization. Thus an individual who is fearful of elevators is asked to imagine boarding a glass-enclosed high-speed elevator, then watching through the glass as the elevator rapidly rises from the ground level to the twentieth floor.

Scenes are presented for extended periods, often several minutes at a time so that the individual experiences the full fear response and it begins to abate. For extinction of the fearful response to occur, it is important that the scene not be terminated until the anxiety abates. Terminating too soon may strengthen rather than alleviate the fearful response. It is sometimes difficult to judge this, and facial and body cues must be carefully observed. Although there are widespread individual differences in the timing, it is typical that the client shows an initial increase in anxiety response and then a gradual abatement of anxiety.

Flooding is based on two-factor learning theory. This theory postulates that individuals learn to escape from situations in which they are presented with unpleasant stimuli. When a warning stimulus reliably predicts the unpleasant event, the individual gradually learns to escape when the warning stimulus is presented, thus avoiding the unpleasant event. If Dad beats Johnny when he comes home drunk, Johnny leaves the house whenever Dad comes in, thus avoiding beatings.

According to two-factor theory, the warning stimulus, through pairing with the unpleasant stimulus, comes to produce anxiety responses in anticipation of the unpleasant event. Escape from the warning stimulus eliminates these anxiety responses and hence is negatively reinforced. Research has shown that avoidance behaviors learned in this way are extremely resistant to extinction, evidently because the person is so effective in avoiding the unpleasant stimulus. This normally is an adaptive re-

sponse, as when the sight of fire comes to produce caution appropriate to the capacity of fire to cause painful burns. Not infrequently, however, through a variety of unfortunate experiences, persons learn to be anxious or fearful in the presence of relatively harmless stimuli. According to behavior theory, this is how phobic responses are initiated (*see* Phobic Disorders).

In animal studies of two-factor learning theory, one effective method for eliminating fear responses to conditioned aversive stimuli when they are no longer followed by the unpleasant stimulus is preventing the animal from escaping the warning stimulus. Prolonged exposure to the warning stimulus without opportunity to escape weakens the escape response. Flooding is analogous to this procedure since the person is exposed to the unpleasant phobic stimulus without opportunity to escape. However, the mechanism of change remains unclear. Wolpe (1995) discounts extinction, exposure, and cognition as adequate explanations for the changes; his hypothesis is that an emotional response to the presence of the therapist plays a vital role through reciprocal inhibition.

Systematic desensitization and implosion share similar treatment goals with flooding but use different approaches. In systematic desensitization the individual is first taught to relax; treatment then begins with minimally anxiety-inducing stimuli, presents them briefly, and progresses gradually to more threatening stimuli, maintaining relaxation throughout. In this way anxiety is minimized throughout treatment. The elevator scene might serve as the final step in systematic desensitization, whereas it is the beginning point in flooding.

Some theorists use the terms *flooding* and *implosion* interchangeably. There are similarities in the two procedures, but important methodological and theoretical distinctions suggest that this confusion is unfortunate. Implosion, as developed by Stampfl, draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory. It is assumed that the basis for phobias is unresolved conflicts involving rejection, dependence, orality, anality, sexuality, loss of impulse control, and guilt stemming from the childhood stages of psychosexual development. Thus the imagery used in implosion focuses on these underlying conflicts rather than concentrating on the identified phobic stimulus. In addition, in implosion it is common to dramatize the scenes to make them as traumatic as possible even though the individual may have never experienced such events. The individual may be asked to imagine climbing into bed with hundreds of snakes, feeling the snakes crawling over his or her body, squeezing and biting the snakes, and so on.

The results of experimental studies of flooding are mixed. Barlow (1988) found efficacy "equivocal"; Ost (1989) found highly favorable outcomes for specific phobias, such as animal phobias, in two-hour sessions. The procedures are not stan-

dardized; thus procedural variations may account for inconsistencies in results. Flooding may be more effective with mild than with intense fears. Early comparative studies found systematic desensitization probably is as effective as flooding; recent investigations generally conclude that in vivo exposure is the preferred approach (Emmelkamp, 1994).

Because of the need to present the fear stimulus in its full intensity, flooding is generally unpleasant. This contributes to premature termination of treatment. Thus most practitioners prefer systematic or in vivo desensitization. Flooding is mostly of historical significance.

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See BEHAVIOR THERAPY; SYSTEMATIC DESENSITIZATION; ANXIETY.