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Covert Sensitization

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often are used to heighten the relief following termination of the imagined aversive stimulus.

Covert sensitization has been employed with homosexuality, pedophilia, obesity, and smoking. Initial studies of its effectiveness have been encouraging.

Covert sensitization offers some advantages over aversion therapy. Since the events are imagined, pictures, slides, projectors, shock apparatus, and other equipment are not required.

However, covert sensitization has two disadvantages. First, because the scenes, behavior, and aversive stimulation are imagined, they are not amenable to precise control. Second, there is the problem of finding a suitable aversive stimulus that the individual is able to imagine. Since most behaviors that are candidates for this approach are highly motivated, intrinsically reinforcing, and under strong stimulus control, it is essential to locate a powerful aversive stimulus.

Finally, covert sensitization shares a limitation common to all the aversive procedures: the failure to establish alternative and more desirable forms of behavior. For this reason some theorists object categorically to all forms of aversive procedures. The majority of professionals, however, agree that the preferred intervention strategy is to use aversion procedures in conjunction with procedures designed to establish positive alternative behaviors. In many applications of covert sensitization the individual terminates the aversive scene and then imagines initiating an alternative, more desirable response.

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See AVERSION THERAPY; BEHAVIOR THERAPY.

Covert Sensitization. A form of aversion therapy in which a covert response such as a thought or an image is followed by an imagined aversive event. An individual may imagine himself relaxing in front of the television and eating a large bowl of hot buttered popcorn, enjoying the smell and taste; he then imagines the rolls of fat accumulating around his waist, having to buy new clothes, and being rejected by his girlfriend because of his weight. In covert sensitization the cognitive elements of the stimulus-response sequence rather than overt responses and external stimuli are dealt with. The goal is to block the thoughts and fantasies that precede undesired overt behaviors and increase their probability.

Although it is possible for an individual to self-administer covert sensitization, it is more common for covert sensitization to be conducted in a structured therapy interaction. Relaxation procedures