



Brattleboro Retreat

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION CARE

What Really Works to Alleviate Anxiety: Lessons Learned from My Patients

Marc Laurens, LICSW

Tuesday, February 18, 2020

12:00 PM to 1:00 PM

Brattleboro, Vermont

This workshop will offer its participants one therapist's 20-year perspective on addressing and easing the anxiety of his patients. Mr. Laurens will cover the skills and methods he employs from cognitive behavioral therapy that reduce the duration and intensity of symptoms, the preventative interventions he recommends to target triggers and underlying causes of anxiety, and how gathering patient feedback has proved his greatest resource.

At the end of this learning event, participants will be able to:

1. Identify at least 2 symptom reduction skills tools that are the most effective for most patients dealing with anxiety disorders.
2. Identify at least 2 relapse prevention tools that are effective for most patients dealing with anxiety disorders.
3. Apply a basic framework for using both short term relief and long term prevention tools.

Marc Laurens, LICSW, received his Master's degree in Social Work from the State of New York University at Stony Brook. With more than thirty years of experience working individually and in groups with adults, couples, and families, he specializes in the treatment of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, and chronic pain. Marc also has extensive experience in treating substance abuse. He is a smoking cessation facilitator for the state of Vermont and has experience in behavioral pain management.

What Really Works to Alleviate Anxiety: *Lessons Learned from My Clients*

Marc Laurens

The Logical Steps of Anxiety Treatment

- Like most treatment of mental health problems, there is a linear progression of steps from stabilization to relapse prevention.
- Ideally, each step provides a measurable way to see progress.
- In addition, it should provide a way for clients to practice what they learn from their own reaction to anxiety.

3 Steps to Better Helping Clients with their Anxiety

- 1. Using individualized coping skills for symptom reduction that are easy to understand and use daily**
- 2. Understanding the connection between anxiety triggers and corresponding thoughts, urges and behaviors**
- 3. Providing a framework to long term prevention of anxiety responses.**

Obstacles in Skills Training

Clients have shown to have difficulties using the skills consistently. The main obstacles identified are:

- Skills do not always provide immediate relief**
- Skills are time consuming**
- Clients either forget or get confused about which skills to use**
- Clients are not consistent over time unless it is part of a routine**

Anxiety Need Assessment: An Important Tool

- **Proper evaluation of how anxiety symptoms affect an individual is essential**
- **A good first step is to assist clients of making a list of all their anxiety symptoms along with the triggers.**
- **For example: “When I go to a crowded public place, I experience the following ... ”**
- **“...this then leads to the following actions and consequences”**

Symptom Reduction: What Seems to Work

- **Clients have reported that noticing a clear reduction in their perceived anxiety is the best motivator to continue using the skills that work.**
- **Clients also report that the skills that work the best are usually sensory based with immediate results and measurable outcomes.**
- **Using an anxiety rating scale is a good way to reinforce progress using “before and after” measures.**

Breathing Skills: How and Why it Seems to Help

- **It is easy to learn**
- **It combines a reduction in tension with distracting elements**
- **The effects are often immediate.**
- **Combined with simple biofeedback (eg: using a pulse oximeter), it is further reinforced.**
- **It works best when introduced and practiced in session, followed by specific assignments to use them in real life.**

Self-Soothing Skills: An Effective Supplement to Breathing

- **Easy to learn and provides more choices**
- **Effects last longer**
- **Can be adapted to different triggers or environment**
- **Does not require much focus or thinking**

Using a Transitional Object: Reliable Tool

- **Effective as it is sensory focused and based on classical conditioning.**
- **More reliable if a client had past experience with it.**
- **Works best if object is easily portable.**
- **Conditioning an object from scratch works but few clients have been able to be patient and consistent enough to make it work.**

Less Reliable Anxiety Management Skills

The following skills have been helpful to some clients in reducing anxiety symptoms but for a variety of reasons are either hard to use consistently or specific to some situations or personalities:

- **One thing in the moment:** good stress management skill, but many clients have hard time putting it into practice.
- **Taking a brief vacation:** another stress management skill but easy to forget
- **Prayer:** often used by clients already comfortable with but harder to conceptualize for others (Prayer in any denominations including Agnostic or Atheist)

Less Reliable Anxiety Management Skills: continued

- **Encouragement:** Hard to reinforce by yourself but more effective if someone can encourage you (similar to opposite to urge).
- **Relaxation:** Like exercise, clients rarely follow through or find time to do it more consistently. Simple or quick mindfulness exercises are usually more adopted by clients.
- **Grounding:** good for dissociation. Most people have trouble finding a grounding skill that helps them with anxiety.
- **Cognitive skills like finding meaning or rationalization** have been rarely used by clients but some have the mind for it.

Understanding One's Own Anxiety

- **Once a client has learned to consistently stabilize their anxiety symptoms, the next step is to learn the connection between their triggers and thoughts/behaviors .**
- **A handout called the model for describing emotions has been helpful by some clients to understand the connection between anxiety triggers and consequences**
- **One aspect that seems to help is understanding the underlying beliefs and perceptions that reinforce anxiety.**

Understanding One's Own Anxiety: continued

- **Another tool that has helped some folks is a behavioral analysis especially if the behavior is directly linked to the anxiety such as unhealthy or impulsive behaviors**
- **Please Master skills such as learning to improve sleep habits and nutrition has been helpful to people willing to address them.**
- **One thing to keep in mind is to meet the client where they are at, since some folks are uncomfortable with learning details about their habits or get overwhelmed with how much to change.**

Relapse Prevention.

When a client is using skills routinely and have a better understanding of his/her anxiety down, moving to prevention skills is important in order to prevent relapse and maintaining a more manageable baseline anxiety.

The following skills seem to help clients in the long term and are usually received well. However, they require more practice and time

Relapse Prevention Tools

1. **Challenging cognitive distortions:** the simplest yet helpful method is to help the client make a list of negative/irrational/racing thoughts that fuel anxiety on one side of the page, and in the other help them challenge the thought using common sense with a positive spin.
2. **Challenging perceptions and beliefs:** using the info learned in understanding the triggers for anxiety, start developing a list of perceptions and core values and see if any can be challenged. (eg: Challenge the belief that someone will fail at any job interview, based on their history)

Relapse Prevention Tools: continued

3. **Mindfulness tools:** After introducing the basics of using mindfulness skills, clients have benefited from the following sensory based mindfulness:
 - Safe place imagery (using all senses)
 - Desensitization (mostly for phobias and using basic anxiety reduction tools) and as part of Exposure therapy.
 - Visualization (visualizing the anxiety situation beforehand)
 - Mindfulness of emotion (guided imagery using imagination to visualize the anxiety and then control it)
 - Self hypnosis (advanced imagery using metaphors, symbols and hypnotic suggestions)

Relapse Prevention Tools: continued

4. Acceptance skills: What has worked consistently is to help the client learn the different stages of acceptance from denial to radical acceptance, and then tie in the concept of accept versus control (similar to the serenity prayer)

Example: a client struggles with financial anxiety: help with making a list of things they cannot change and thus accept them, along with a list of things they can do, such as asking for help or learn to make a budget

Other basic acceptance skills such as awareness of the body or half smiling have been rarely used and are often hard to practice.

Final takeaways

- **Most clients who consistently use skills for anxiety management show improvement. Many have also benefited from compiling a cheat sheet of the skills that have consistently helped them for the symptoms they struggle with.**
- **Using Benzodiazepines is a risky business because of the high addiction potential and state dependent learning. It seems that the safest method has been to only use these drugs in the initial phase of treatment, (when the symptoms are severe) or to use them PRN, when skills are insufficient.**
- **Regardless, there are alternatives to Benzodiazepines and thus psychiatrists are needed to help provide other medicinal options.**
- **A similar treatment approach seems to also work with other mental health symptoms.**

Bibliography

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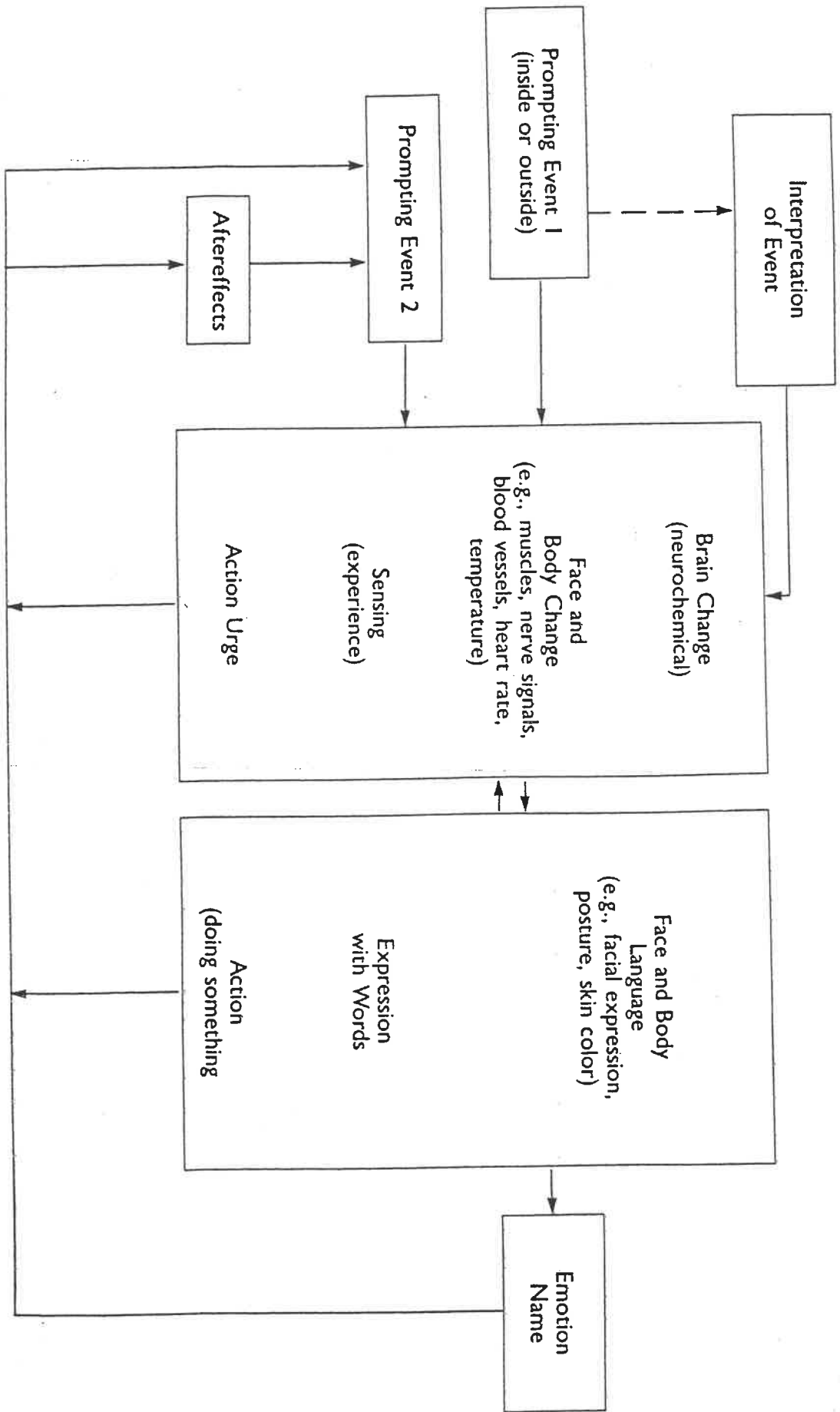
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EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 3

Model for Describing Emotions



Conflict of Interest Disclosure

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