



A New Approach to Behavioral Exposure for Adolescents with Public Speaking Anxiety: A Case Example

Hannah Rogers | Dr. Polly Waite | Prof. Cathy Creswell

Introduction

This case example describes a preliminary evaluation of a novel approach to behavioural exposure for adolescents who fear public speaking.



Background

Public Speaking Fear

- Public speaking is one of the most frequently reported and distressing fears, especially for people with high social anxiety (Stein, Torgrud & Walker, 2000). It can be particularly challenging at school and may lead to young people adapting their life choices to avoid speaking in front of others.
- Encouragingly, effective treatment of public speaking fear can also improve other symptoms of social anxiety (Hoffman, 2004).

Treatment

- Effective treatments for anxiety generally involve exposing the person to the situation, or object, of their fear in a controlled way (Norton & Price, 2007). However, approximately 40-50% of people do not benefit from this approach (Loerinc et al, 2015).
- Research with adults has shown that affect labelling (e.g. "I feel scared") alongside exposure, is more effective at reducing fear compared to traditional strategies such as cognitive reappraisals (e.g. "It will be OK") (Kircanski, Lieberman & Craske, 2012) and exposure alone (Niles et al. 2015). However, this approach has yet to be explored with anxious adolescents, and as such, its relevance to young people is unclear.
- This case example examined whether exposure with affect labelling was associated with a reduction in anxiety in an adolescent who feared public speaking.

Method

Case

- Jade, a female adolescent (aged 14 years) was recruited from a UK secondary school to take part in the study. Jade rated her public speaking anxiety at 6/8 and avoidance at 4/8.

Procedure

- Prepare and deliver a variety of brief, video-recorded speeches.
- To elicit a social evaluative situation, speeches were delivered in front of a pre-recorded classroom audience of age-matched peers (see Fig. 1). Jade was told that these would be shown to peers and a teacher from a different area.



Figure 1. Speech task

- Exposure sessions were conducted across 2 days (Day 1 and Day 2) (see Fig. 2). The same procedure was used on both days, but speech topics differed.

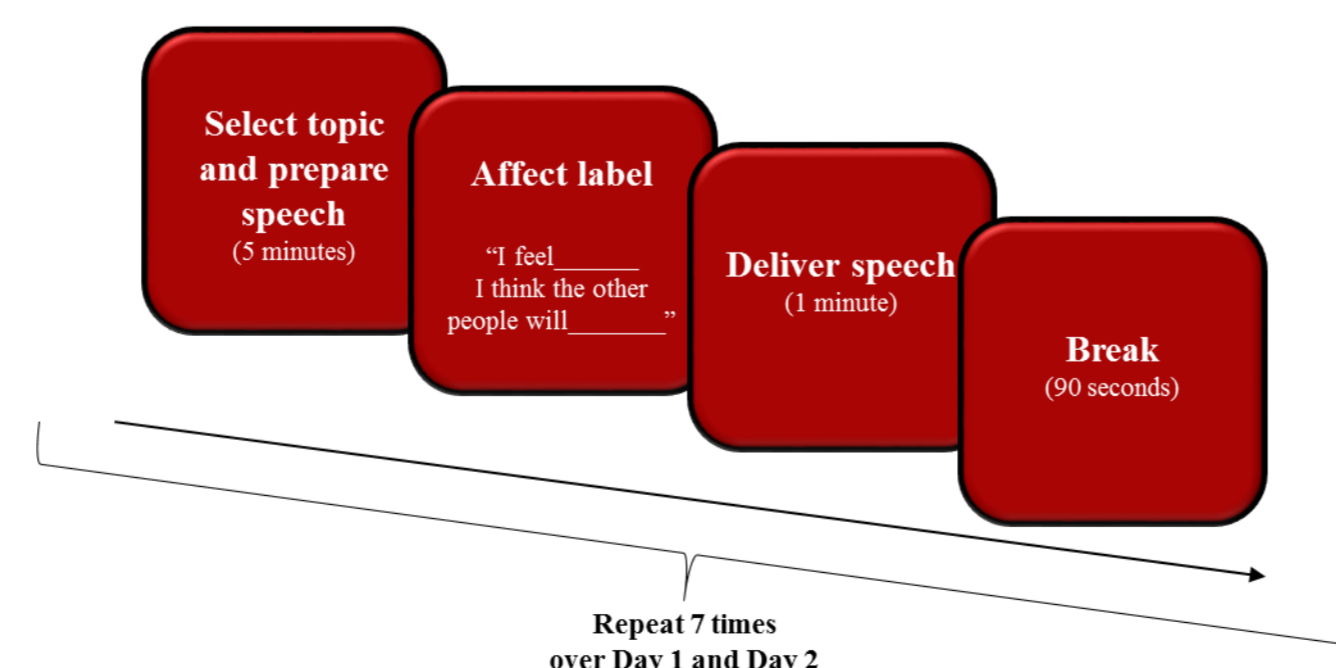


Figure 2. Exposure task

Affect Labelling

- During exposure sessions, Jade was instructed to come up with and say a sentence out loud that included:
 - a negative word to describe how she felt about doing the speech
 - a negative way that she thought the other people would judge her performance

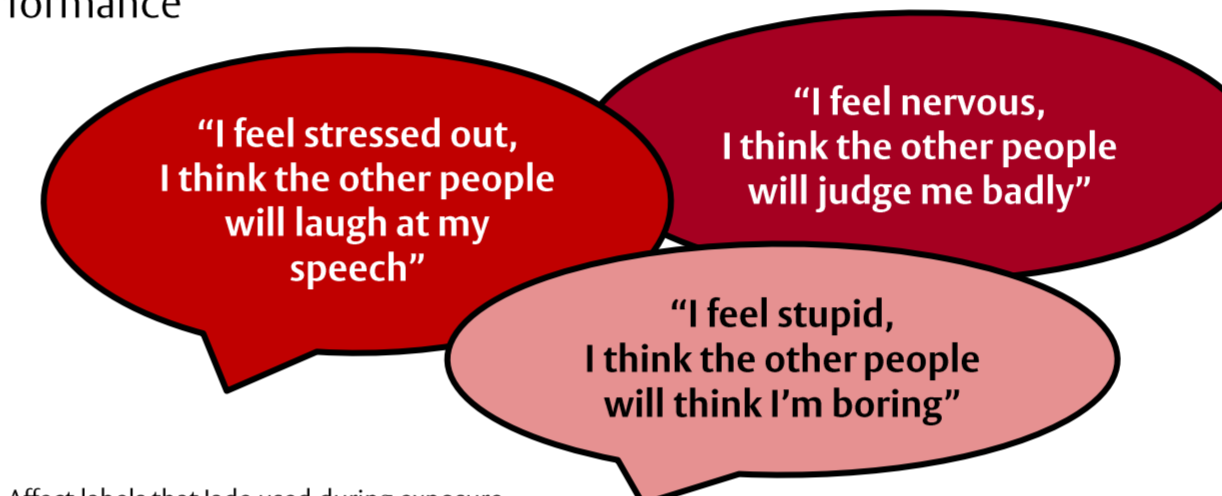


Figure 3. Affect labels that Jade used during exposure

Measures

- Subjective Units of Distress (SUDS)**
"How anxious are you feeling right now?"
Not anxious > Quite anxious > Extremely anxious (0-10)
- Physiological Activity**
Heart rate (HR)
- SUDS and HR were assessed before (anticipation), and after (recovery) each speech.

Results

SUDS

- The SUDS data shown in Fig.4 illustrates an overall improvement in Jade's anxiety before, and after, delivering a speech.

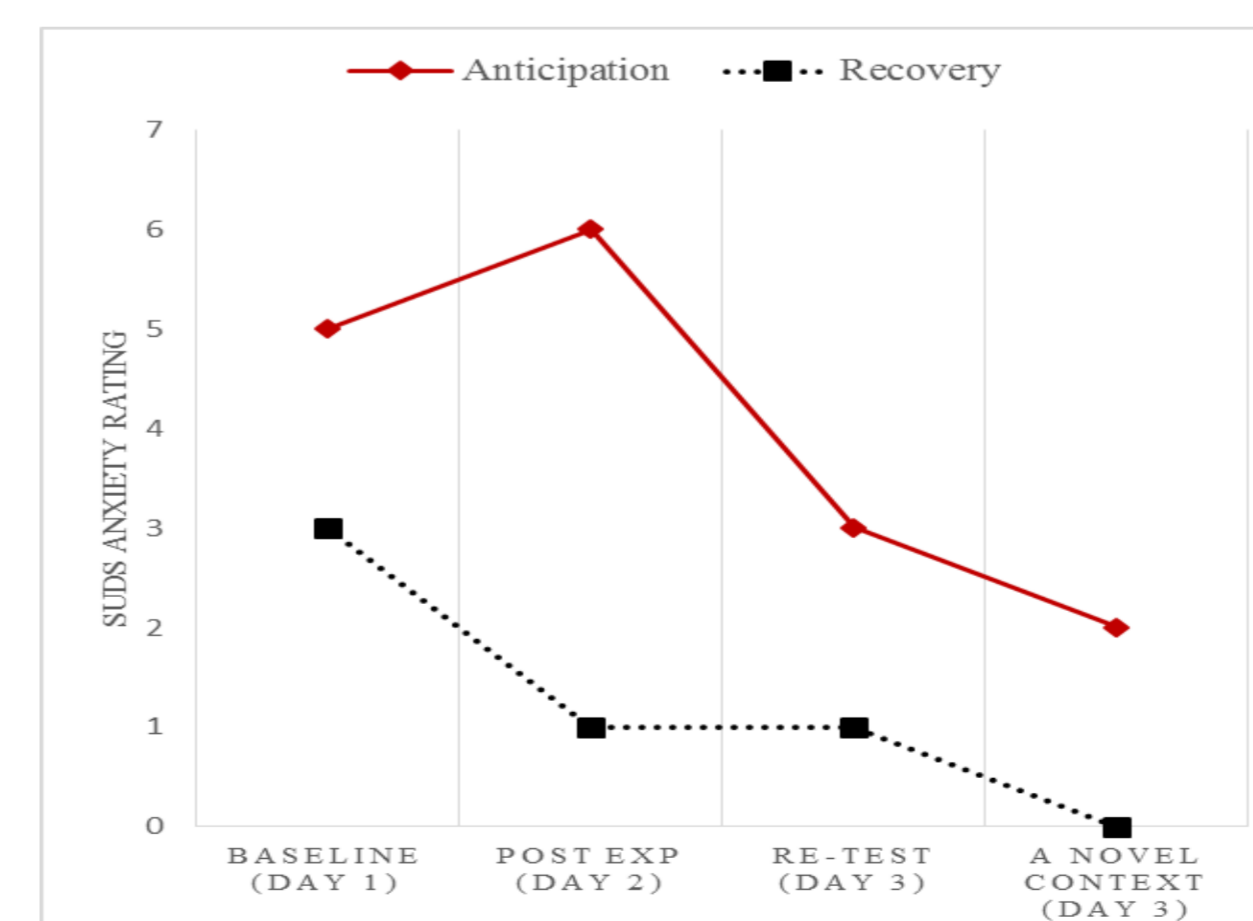


Figure 4. SUDS anxiety ratings at baseline, post-exposure, re-test and in a novel context

Heart Rate

- The HR data shown in Fig.5 illustrates that Jade's HR before delivering a speech steadily declined across time points.
- Fig. 5 also reveals that during recovery, Jade's HR increased from Baseline to Post-Test, and decreased from Post-Test to Re-Test and after delivering a speech in a novel context.

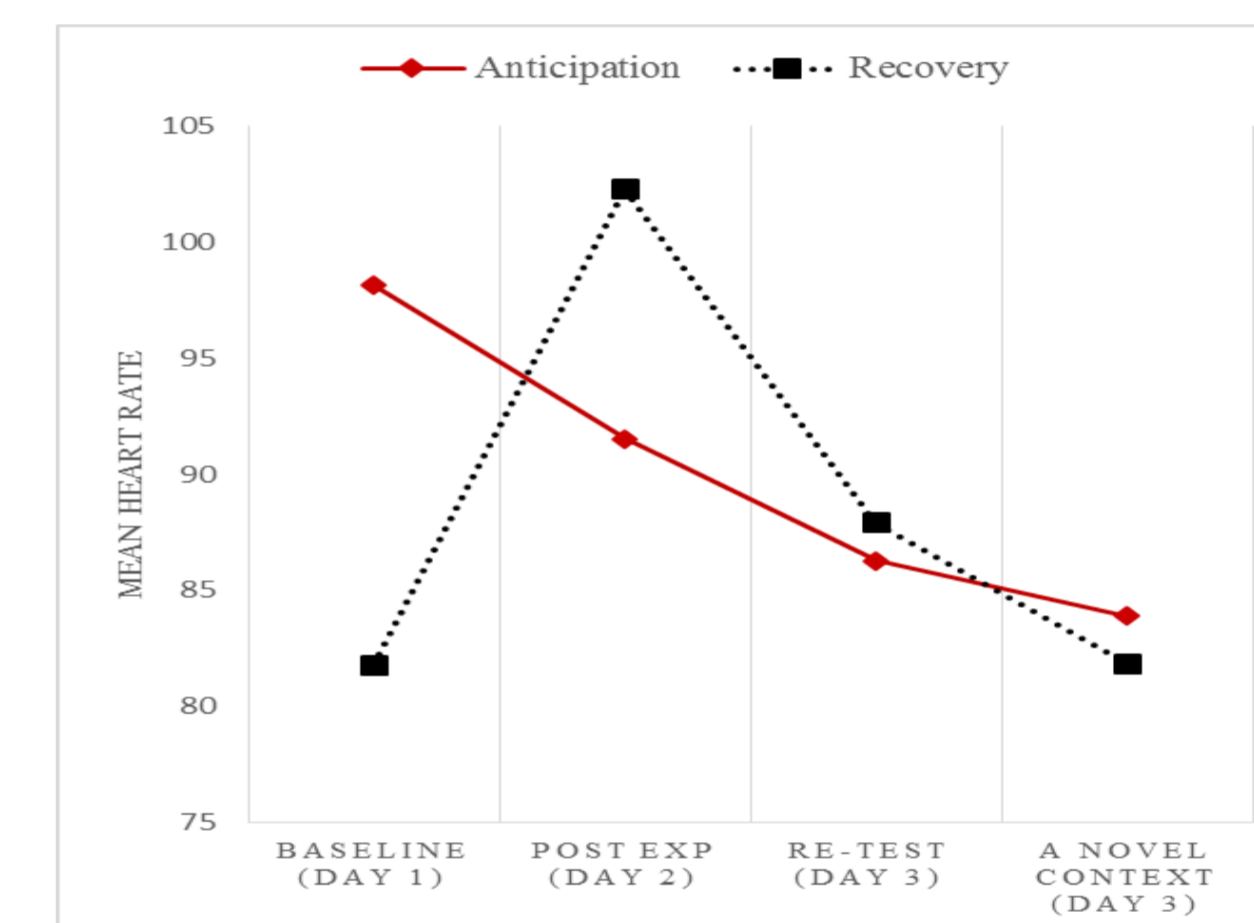


Figure 5. Mean heart rate at baseline, post-exposure, re-test and in a novel context

Discussion

- The findings suggest that affect labelling may be a promising adjunct to behavioural exposure for adolescents who fear public speaking.
- Future research will determine if exposure with affect labelling is more effective than traditional approaches (e.g. cognitive reappraisals before exposure) and / or exposure alone in reducing public speaking fears in young people.



Contact information

- Email: hannah.rogers@pgr.reading.ac.uk
- Department of Psychology & Clinical Language Sciences, University of Reading, Whiteknights, RG6 6AH
- Website: <https://andyresearchclinic.com/> | Twitter: https://twitter.com/andy_res_clin