A Smorgasbord of Psychotherapeutic Techniques for Children and Adolescents

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A menu (too long, but...):

1. Targeted muscle relaxation for tics
2. Intrusive thought protocol
3. Desensitization with pictures
4. Parent tells positive example, therapist and child illustrate story
5. Child generates story, therapist types
6. Parenting big ideas
7. Anti-hyperventilation strategies
8. Journey story and 12 thoughts
9. 12 thought exercise
10. Dramatic play
11. Teaching names of 16 skills through plays
12. Tones of approval
13. Brief vignettes for skill identification drill
14. Skills stories
15. Celebrations exercise
16. Guess the skill with cards
17. Guess the feeling with cards
18. Brainstorming options

Menu continued

19. Pros and cons
20. Written fantasy rehearsals
21. Reflections exercise
22. Shaping game
23. Divergent thinking exercise

Common element:

Figure out a way to provide models, instruction, reinforcement, and particularly, practice, of the positive pattern of thought, emotion, or behavior that will work better than the pattern that is presently the “prepotent response.” (Or maintain the prepotent response if it’s already good enough!)

That is, the same way that Steph Curry got good at shooting baskets, Yuja Wang got good at piano, Simone Biles got good at gymnastics….

Fantasy rehearsal works

“... this mental practice habit contributed to my developing a reputation in college for not practicing because I spent so little time at the practice rooms…. Off and on throughout the day, whether I was walking to class, eating, or just sitting around, I would often find myself inside my head, hearing whatever I was working on, seeing and feeling my fingers play the notes, trying out different fingerings or bowings, experimenting with shifts and finger pressures, correcting mistakes, all in my head. At the end of the day, I’d spend an hour or two going over the things I had already spent all day working on, and that would be the end of it.”

– Noa Kageyama

The college referred to is Julliard, where he’s a faculty member.

What sorts of positive patterns? The Psychological Skills Axis

1. Productivity
2. Joyousness
3. Kindness
4. Honesty
5. Fortitude

6a. Good individual decisions

6b. Good joint decisions

7. Nonviolence
8. Respectful talk
9. Friendship-building
10. Self-discipline
11. Loyalty
12. Conservation
13. Self-care
14. Compliance
15. Positive fantasy rehearsal
16. Courage

The Methods of Influence Axis (Oh Ram Prism)

1. Objective-formation
2. Hierarchy
3. Relationship
4. Attribution
5. Modeling
6. Practice
7. Reinforcement and punishment
8. Instruction
9. Stimulus situation control
10. Monitoring

#1 Targeted Muscle Relaxation for Tics

This is a variation of Habit Reversal Training, (HRT) a component of Comprehensive Behavioral Intervention for Tics (CBIT).

A complete description of CBIT and HRT and lecture on Tics and Tourette's is beyond scope of present discussion.

Aspects of Targeted Muscle Relaxation Not Standard for HRT

1. Rather than picking a competing response to replace the tic, there is a standard competing response: relaxation of the very muscles that are contracted to carry out the tic (and their opposing muscles, also).
2. Helping the patient figure out what those muscles are: do the tic motion voluntarily. If possible, do it against some resistance you furnish with your hand. a) Feel with a hand which muscles are contracting. b) Feel with your own proprioceptors which muscles are contracting. c) When two bones are getting closer to each other, that's a clue that the muscle running between them is contracting.

Targeted Muscle Relaxation continued

3. Also figure out the muscles that oppose those. After the tic contraction, move back to the starting point, and use the same 3 methods to figure out which muscles are the opposite of the tic movement. You may need to get the idea of opposing muscles with easy pairs like biceps-triceps.

4. For vocal tics, you do the same thing; you probably will need to rely mostly on proprioception. Observing the neck with a mirror can help.

5. Now practice contracting both of those sets of muscles at once, so that you are tensing both of them, without moving, and of course after every contraction of both there is a relaxation of both. Practice that motionless contraction and relaxation lots of times. But this contraction is *not* the competing response for the tic.

Targeted Muscle Relaxation Continued

6. The competing response, the replacement, for the tic is the relaxation part of the tension and relaxation sequence. Practice this a bunch of times, without the tension part preceding it.
7. As in HRT, be aware of any premonitory signals. Now do fantasy rehearsals of getting a premonitory signal, doing the relaxation of the tic muscles and their opponents, many times. (Fantasy the premonitory, real-life practice the muscle relaxation.) Goal is that relaxation of these particular muscles becomes a habitual response to the premonitory signal. (Sometimes fantasy of the premonitory signal actually creates the real-life signal, just as if you imagine yourself getting an itch somewhere on your body, one often appears. This provides even more realistic practice.)
8. If there are no premonitory signals, any tic is usually a signal that another is to follow before long. So fantasy rehearse practicing relaxing the targeted muscles in response to a recent tic.

Targeted Muscle Relaxation Continued

9. After each step, celebrate that you have done it, congratulate yourself for taking a step in the right direction. Prepare yourself for the fact that lots of practice is often necessary – many repetitions, before the results are apparent.

#2: Intrusive Thought Protocol, and Illustration of Therapist-generated modeling stories

1. Become familiar with the “white bear” problem: “Get it out of my head” strategy keeps it in your head.
2. Thus, decide to “let it run its course” rather than trying to banish it from consciousness.
3. The white bear problem doesn’t create obsessions about white bears, but about thoughts that are embarrassing or shameful or guilt-producing, such that we’re motivated to try not to think of them. But one is not alone in this experience. It’s OCD, not being a horrible person. The goal is that the thoughts don’t bother you; it’s not to keep them out of your head.

Intrusive thought protocol

4. Celebration of the thought-behavior distinction. “Hooray, isn’t it wonderful that we don’t have to act out every image that we imagine!”
5. Decision: What do I want to do while this is running its course? Something that is a good use of time, something fun or useful. Just as if this weren’t running its course.
6. Carry out that choice.
7. Celebrate greatly that I was able to do something good while it was running its course.

Important distinction re. what we're trying to desensitize

If the intrusive thoughts are of doing something violent, you're not trying to make the gory details of the violence comfortable to imagine; you're not promoting repetitive imagining of carrying out the violence.

Rather, you're trying to make the situation of unwanted images coming into the mind fairly comfortable to deal with. The images themselves may remain aversive. In practicing this situation, the images can remain vague.

This is different from some practitioners who have insisted that people imagine themselves doing the forbidden activity, seeing the horrible consequences, etc. – which is very painful and tends to result in flight from treatment. And a SUD level from imagining oneself doing very bad things is adaptive.

Story about Intrusive thoughts, to be illustrated by child

Tim Deals with Intrusive Thoughts

Tim got some intrusive thoughts. The thoughts were of bad behaviors that Tim didn't like.

Tim thought, "I'll not get into the white bear problem. I'll not try hard to get these out of my mind. I'll let them run their course!"

He thought, "I'm so glad that people don't have to act out every image that comes to mind. I'm happy about the "thought-behavior distinction!"

He thought, "What's something good for me to do now? I could take the dog for a walk. I could clean up my room some."

He thought, "I could practice shooting basketball. Or draw some pictures."

He decided to take the dog out for a walk. The dog really enjoyed that!

Tim thought, "Hooray! I'm really glad I was able to do something worthwhile, while the thoughts were running their course!"

#3 Desensitization with Pictures

Desensitization paradigm:

1. From history, compile a bunch of situations that elicit the unwanted emotion (e.g. fear or anger)
2. Patient rates the SUD level for each. You will be arranging situations in order of SUD level – getting a “hierarchy.”
3. Generate situations that elicit lower SUD levels-- 1,2,3, even 0 on scale of 10
4. Ways of generating lower SUD situations: imagine not do, imagine someone else, imagine seeing on a screen, imagine the screen is far away, use image of cartoon characters

Desensitization paradigm continued

5. Teach and practice an alternative to the flight or fight response: usually relaxation is a good one, but pleasant excitement or excited courage is often useful.
6. Start with lowest on the hierarchy. Practice thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are desired for the situation.
7. Prolonged practice is better than brief. Try to avoid terminating the practice trial contingent upon the SUD being too high, because this reinforces the SUD itself. (generate SUD→ escape→ termination of unpleasant feeling (neg. reinf.)
8. When in doubt, practice longer on low SUD situations vs. moving up the hierarchy too quickly.

Desensitization paradigm continued

9. Use the alternative TEB pattern (thought, emotion, behavior) before, after, or during the practice.
10. Move up the hierarchy at a rate that's OK with the patient.
11. Move to real-life situations if appropriate at some point.
12. Greatly celebrate, and help patient celebrate, every bit of successful practice and every lowering of SUD levels.
13. Not just for children: getting pictures (and sometimes sounds or videos) can be great ways of presenting the situations to practice with.

Some picture sets for desensitization

Vomit

Shots and blood draws

Bugs

Hospitals

Dentistry

#4: Parent report positive behavior, illustrate story about it

Prepare parent ahead of time to report positive examples the child has done.

Parent narrates to therapist some positive examples, in child's presence. Therapist jots down.

Therapist picks one, writes the story in about 4 captions, one caption per page. See if child agrees you're getting it right. (Quickly, before child gets too restless!)

Print out the pages.

Child and therapist illustrate each page. Therapist helps out if child gets too perfectionistic about the art.

Pages get stapled down the side. They take the book home, to read together. (Or to lose it, whichever comes first!)

#5 Child generates story, therapist types

With or without illustrations

With or without taking turns picking a picture from box which would illustrate it and making up story about picture

With or without a “which skill” comprehension probe.

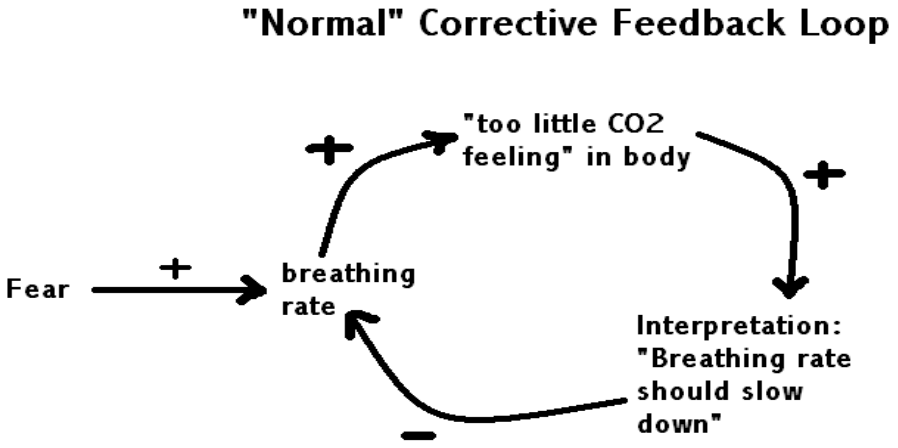
The “which skill” comprehension probe is of the format “When ___ did ___, was that an example of skill x, or skill y?” If there are no positive examples: option 1: “Let’s put one in!” option 2: “When ___ did ___, was that a bad example of skill x, or skill y?”

#6 Parenting Big Ideas

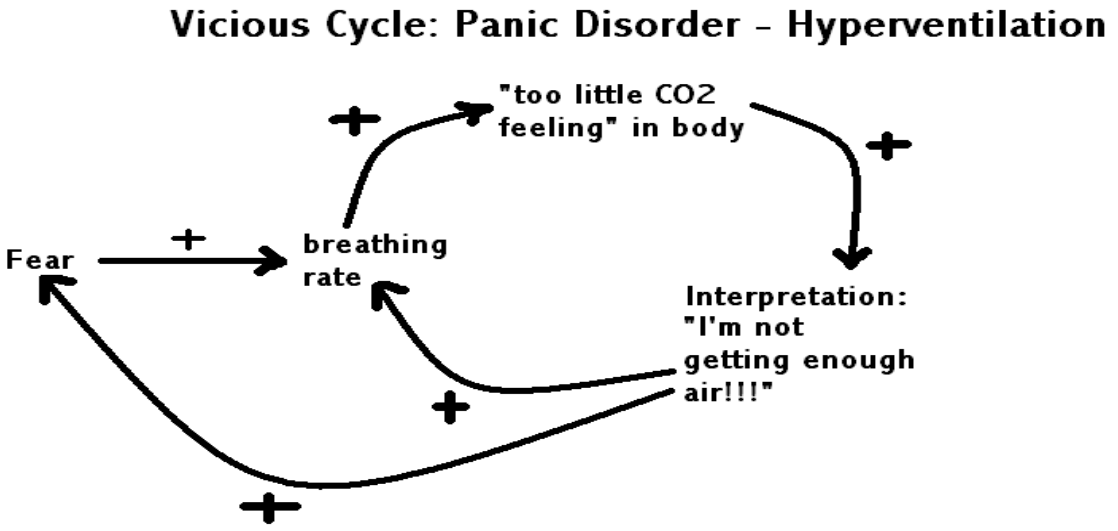
How much have you used each of these parenting ideas?

1. Watch for positive examples of skills and reinforce them, with joyous comment, at the time, telling other adult, and later at nightly review (e.g. at bedtime). Extra mile: commemorate in writing. Celebrate positive examples not just of child but of all family members including yourself. Aim for family emotional climate where people reinforce each other often. Use the names of the 16 skills when talking about them.
2. Use tones of enthusiasm in voice when reinforcing.
3. Non-reinforce negative behavior. Particularly, don't give the the child what they want to get them to stop something.
4. Eliminate unnecessary commands. Differentiate commands and suggestions. Follow up with the commands you do give, and reinforce compliance.
5. Verbal interaction for positive emotional climate. REFFF vs. CCCT. (Reflections, telling about your own Experience, Facilitations, Follow-up questions, positive Feedback, vs. Commands, Criticisms, Contradictions, Threats.) (Facilitations = Uh huh. I see. OK. Yes. Humh….)
6. Furnish for the child as many positive models of the skills as possible, from you, from media, from other people. Limit the negative models. Read positive models together.
7. Look for ways of doing things together that are fun for both. “Mutually Gratifying Activities.” Can you make it fun to Walk and Talk? Have fun doing household chores together? Take turns reading aloud? Play cooperative games?
8. Dr. L.W. Aap for joint decisions. Defining, Reflecting, Listing, Waiting, Advantages, Agreeing, Politeness.

#7: Anti-hyperventilation strategies



Fundamental mistake: to err on the side of safety, conclude not enough breath



3 exercises for anti-hyperventilation

1. 5 in and 5 out
2. Hold the breath, note the high CO2 feeling, cure it by a couple of quick breaths
3. Hyperventilate for 5, 10, or 15 breaths, note the low CO2 feeling (and the difference between that and the high CO2 feeling) and cure it by a very slow breath, e.g. in and out once over 30 to 45 seconds.

#8: Journey Story to teach 12 thought categorization

1. Awfulizing
2. Getting down on self
3. Blaming someone else
4. Not awfulizing
5. Not down on self
6. Not blaming other
7. Goal-setting
8. Listing options and choosing
9. Learning from experience
10. Celebrating luck
11. Celebrating someone else's choice
12. Celebrating own choice

#9: 12 thought exercise

You think of 1 situation about which you will take turns generating each of the 12 thoughts.

The purpose of this is to train the brain to realize that there are different ways to think about any situation, and you can pick the way that works best. This has a big influence on how you feel and act. (Fundamental principle of cognitive therapy.)

#10: Teaching the names of psychological skills through plays

1. Productivity
2. Joyousness
3. Kindness
4. Honesty
5. Fortitude

6a. Good indiv. decisions

6b. Good joint decisions

7. Nonviolence + anger control
8. Respectful talk
9. Friendship-building
10. Self-discipline
11. Loyalty
12. Conservation
13. Self-care
14. Compliance
15. Positive fantasy rehearsal
16. Courage

#11: Tracking and describing, modeling, differential reinforcement in dramatic play

Doing dramatic play helps the child develop the skill of perspective taking: seeing things from the point of view of someone else (in this case, the character in the play).

Doing dramatic play helps the child practice social interactions.

It's lots of fun with young children to model some example of respectful talk a few times in dramatic play and hear the child start using that when their characters interact.

Tracking and describing= Observing what's going on, putting it into words. The more prosocial the behavior, the more enthusiastic is the tracking and describing tone.

The philosophy of this is to encourage positive fantasy rehearsal in a fun way, not to come to inferences about the child's dynamics or to encourage the child's expression of conflictual or troubling issues, but no matter what the overt purpose, those things often come out anyway.

Teaching parents to do good dramatic play with young children can be life-changing, if you can find parents who are motivated for this mission and have time for it.

#12: Tones of approval and enthusiasm

- Neutral
- Small to moderate approval and enthusiasm
- Large approval and enthusiasm
- Tones of voice are important for: 1) differential reinforcement, and more importantly 2) contributing to a positive emotional climate.

#13: Brief vignettes for drill on identifying psychological skills

Short, longer, and longest versions

The appearance of the squirrel who is the sign that $10K in imaginary dollars come drifting down like falling leaves from the ceiling does seem to add to the enjoyment of this.

#14 and #15: Skills stories and celebrations exercise

Skills stories: Take turns making up little stories about someone doing something good. Figure out which of the 16 skills were exemplified.

Celebrations exercise: Take turns answering: What's something you're glad you have done, in your whole life? Which of the skills?

If child can't think of anything, go to "celebrations interview." Have you ever ___? That's an example of _____!

Advanced version, take turns as you go down the skills list and come up with a skills story or celebration for each one of them.

#16 and #17: Guess the skill, guess the feeling, with cards

Pick 2 cards, 2 feelings or 2 psychological skills. Act out a situation that exemplifies one of them. Person can guess then, or look at the two cards and guess between the two of them.

With skills: promotes positive fantasy rehearsals of skills. With feelings: promotes “emotional literacy,” and also the knowledge that if you want to give a good clue, tell the self-talk of the character you’re acting. Thus further familiarity with main idea of cognitive therapy.

#18 The Simplest Possible Anger Control Training: Brainstorming Options (with provocations)

1. Get access to a big list of anger triggers, a.k.a. provocations. There are several hundred of these in appendices to the book on anger control that I wrote. The Novaco Anger Scale contains 25 of these. If you gather them directly from the patient's experience, change the details or let time go by so the patient is NOT feeling that you're saying, "You screwed up and now let's think of what you should have done instead."
2. Take turns brainstorming nonviolent options regarding what the person could do or say. Generate at least 5 or 6 of them. It's good to write them down as you go.
3. Each of you independently pick which one is your first choice, and then on to the next.
4. Much congratulations for good ideas and for more ideas.
5. The brainstorming options exercise is an all-purpose psychological health exercise, not just for anger control.
6. The divergent thinking exercise is a great predecessor to brainstorming options exercise. (Later on, if we get to it.)

#19 Pros and Cons, Consequences

For a given hypothetical option someone is considering, take turns listing pros or cons. When it's your turn, you can do either.

Someone considers joining a soccer team.

Someone considers adopting a cat.

Someone considers Spanish as a language to study.

Someone is being picked on and taunted, and considers hitting the other person as hard as possible the next time it happens.

#20: Written fantasy rehearsals

Looking at pictures of bugs: coping

Situation: I decide to do some practicing by looking at some of the bugs in the packet of pictures that I have.

Thoughts: Doing this is stirring up a SUD level, but at the same time I'm about to do a real courage skills triumph by doing exposure and practice. The fact that I'm doing this at all, and the fact that I decided on my own to do it, are two reasons for me to celebrate my own choice. I remind myself that there's no harm that can come to me by looking at pictures, so I'm totally safe. I celebrate the fact that it's possible to do some useful practice with pictures, that has been shown to also help out with exposures to real bugs.

Emotions: I feel proud of myself for doing this. I feel determined to do it in a way that increases my chances of having a success experience. The pictures have different SUD levels associated with them, and I pick some to practice with that bring out a fairly low SUD level.

Behaviors: I gaze at the pictures that are at the level of difficulty that I think is right for this practice. If I want to make the exposure more realistic, I imagine seeing a bug that looks just like that, in real life. If I want to make the exposure less realistic, I look at the paper the picture is printed on, and notice the texture of it, and the whiteness of the paper around it. I relax my muscles as I'm practicing with the picture, and I notice whether relaxing affects the SUD level. I keep going as long as I had planned, and then I finish up!

Celebration: Hooray, that was a courage skill triumph! I also did some real goal-directed behavior by choosing to do this myself, without needing anyone to prompt me! I'm practicing a way of reducing fears, that will be useful for me for the rest of my life!

Another example of a written fantasy rehearsal

Generic compulsion, coping

Situation: I am feeling a very strong urge to do a certain behavior. The behavior doesn't make things better in the long run, and even makes things worse, even though it may reduce a SUD level in the very short run. I think this behavior fits the definition of a compulsion.

Thoughts: This is a choice point that gives me an opportunity to reduce the strength of this compulsion, by doing exposure and ritual prevention rather than giving in to the compulsion. The exposure part is already accomplished, because I'm in the situation that gives me the urge to do the compulsion. It will take self-discipline to resist the urge to do the compulsion, but I want very much to do this. It will be a major courage triumph if I can do it. I will have to put up with a SUD level, but I remind myself of the very important fact that this feeling of distress or discomfort does not mean I am in actual danger. It is a false signal, and I want to reduce this signal by habituating to the situation.

Emotions: I feel a certain SUD level as I resist the urge to give in to the compulsion. I feel proud of myself that I am toughing out this feeling of distress and not doing the compulsion to make it go away. As I continue the exposure, the SUD level gradually diminishes, and I feel really good about that!

Behaviors: I continue not to allow myself to give in to the compulsion. I may just relax and be mindful of the urge I'm feeling, but resisting. Or, I may ask myself, what is my best use of time now, what is the best behavior that I can do now, and make my choice, and do that behavior while the urge to do the compulsion continues to linger in the background. The urge to do the compulsion gradually recedes as I enact my good choices.

Celebration: Hooray! I did a courage skills triumph! I did a successful exposure and ritual prevention. Each time I do this, the power of the compulsion goes down. I have taken a very important step toward conquering it!

Coping rehearsal, cope with your SUD. Mastery, have no SUD.

Generic compulsion, mastery

Situation: I'm in the situation that has in the past elicited a compulsion. But I've practiced enough that it’s no longer a problem!

Thoughts: I celebrate the work I've done to get over the compulsion that I had.

Emotions: I feel no need to do the compulsion at this point. When I don't do the compulsion, I don't feel a SUD level. I have a really liberated feeling.

Behavior: I do whatever is best to do in this situation.

Celebration: Hooray, this is one more exposure that makes even stronger the habit of not doing the compulsion in this situation!

#21: Reflections exercise

Purposes: Social skill, empathy, attention

Prompts: So you're saying _____?

What I hear you saying is _____.

In other words, _____?

So if I understand you right, _____?

It sounds like _____.

Are you saying that _____?

You're saying that _____?

The exercise: One person talks, stops often. The other does a reflection each time. The talker gives feedback as to whether the understanding was correct.

#22: The Shaping Game

The shaper thinks of a behavior for the shapee to do, and writes it down (and maybe draws it.)

The shapee gets up and starts randomly trying things, and listens for the clues of the shaper.

Both have the goal that the shapee does the chosen behavior – a cooperative game.

The only way the shaper can give clues is by positive reinforcement of something the shapee has already done.

What's the point of the shaping game?

A large part of psychopathology, and other human misery, comes from excess punishment, criticism, coercion, including that directed toward the self; reliance on avoidance motivation rather than approach motivation.

Shaping, or rewarding successive approximations to a goal, without punishment, makes for pleasant interactions between people and positive emotions in oneself.

This is not to say there is no role at all for punishment and criticism/correction. But knowing how to withhold it and rely on differential use of positive reinforcement is a very important skill for the repertoire, and the game is meant to give practice with it.

It's a good one for family members to do with one another.

#23 Divergent thinking exercise

There’s a question that has many answers.

Therapist and child take turns generating possibilities, until they are ready to stop!

What’s the point of this?

This exercises the same sort of thinking that goes into brainstorming options and predicting consequences (pros or cons). It is in the same “response class” and probably strengthens those skills that are really subsets of it.

Lots of evidence demonstrates that thinking of multiple options or multiple consequences leads to better decisions.

Particularly if you get into thinking of whimsical answers to this, it’s lots of fun.

Examples of Divergent Thinking Exercise Questions

Some is surprised. Why?

Someone forgot something. What?

Someone learned to do something. What?

Someone is proud. What are they proud about?

Someone gave a gift. What was it?

Someone was angry. Why?

Someone said, “I’m glad that’s over.” What was it?

Someone heard a noise. What was it?

Some people thought up a question for this exercise. What is it?