



Systematic Desensitization Techniques in Overcoming Specific Phobias in Adolescents

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Abstract. *This study explores systematic desensitization therapy in addressing specific phobias among adolescents, particularly arachnophobia, ophidiophobia, and katsaridaphobia. The research aims to explore the subjective experiences of adolescents undergoing systematic desensitization for specific phobias, focusing on perception and emotional changes. A qualitative phenomenological method was employed to delve into the subjective experiences of adolescents with specific phobias. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with validity ensured through triangulation and member checking. Findings indicate that adolescents experienced significant anxiety reduction and decreased avoidance behaviors, thanks to therapist support and the application of relaxation techniques. This study highlights the importance of understanding individual experiences to enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. Thus, systematic desensitization, combined with supportive therapeutic practices, proves to improve the quality of life for adolescents struggling with specific phobias. These findings not only enrich academic literature but also aid practitioners in designing interventions that are more responsive to patient needs.*

Keywords : *Systematic Desensitization Techniques, Specific Phobias, Adolescents*

1. BACKGROUND

Specific phobia is one of the most common anxiety disorders, characterized by an irrational and excessive fear of a particular object or situation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Adolescents, as a vulnerable group, are in a complex developmental phase, facing significant physical, emotional, and social changes. Specific phobia can interfere with their daily functioning and emotional well-being (Kessler et al., 2005).

The study focused on the cases of several teenagers who experienced specific phobias towards animals, found in a high school in the city of Surabaya. Three teenagers experienced specific phobias: arachnophobia, ophidiophobia, and katsaridaphobia. They showed extreme physical responses and avoidance behaviors when exposed to related stimuli, such as increased heart rate and cold sweats. This fear interfered with their daily lives and emotional well-being, prompting avoidance of places where the phobic object might be present.

(Fredrikson et al., 1996). Despite its high prevalence, many affected individuals do not seek treatment, often due to lack of awareness or access to effective therapeutic interventions (Stinson et al., 2007).

Systematic desensitization, a behavioral therapy developed by Wolpe (1958), is recognized as effective in treating specific phobias. This technique involves gradual exposure

to feared stimuli while using relaxation exercises to reduce anxiety responses (Wolpe, 1990). Studies have shown that systematic desensitization can reduce phobic symptoms and improve an individual's quality of life (Choy et al., 2007). However, despite its proven effectiveness quantitatively, there is a gap in our understanding of how adolescents experience and evaluate this therapy from their subjective perspective.

This study aims to explore their subjective experiences in overcoming their phobia. Although previous studies have shown quantitative effectiveness in reducing phobia symptoms, there is a lack of exploration into how adolescents subjectively experience and process therapy. Studies by Menzies and Harris (2017) and Wolitzky-Taylor et al. (2018) showed the effectiveness of exposure and desensitization therapy, but did not explore how individuals perceived the therapy process. This gap suggests the need for more in-depth research into adolescents' subjective experiences using a qualitative phenomenological approach. This study offers novelty by exploring perceptions, challenges, and emotional and cognitive changes that occur during the intervention. These findings are expected to improve therapy methods by revealing adolescents' subjective experiences, allowing therapists to adapt more effective and relevant techniques, and providing practical contributions in designing interventions that are more responsive to individual needs.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

Systematic desensitization theory, developed by Joseph Wolpe in 1958, is one of the most widely recognized behavioral therapy techniques for treating phobias and anxiety disorders. The theory is rooted in the principles of behaviorism, which emphasizes learning through association and conditioning. In the context of phobias, systematic desensitization aims to reduce excessive anxiety responses to feared stimuli by teaching clients to respond in more adaptive ways .

Key Principles:

1. **Relaxation:** The first step in systematic desensitization is to teach the client relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. The goal is to help the client reduce the physical and emotional tension associated with anxiety. Relaxation becomes an important tool that clients use to manage anxiety during the gradual exposure process.
2. **Graded Exposure:** The client is gradually introduced to the anxiety-provoking stimulus, starting from the least frightening to the most frightening, according to a hierarchy of fears that has been developed with the client. This process aims to familiarize the client

with the stimulus in a safe and controlled setting, so that the anxiety response decreases over time.

Therapy Process:

1. **Stimulus Identification** The therapist works with the client to identify the stimulus that causes the phobia and understand the level of anxiety it causes.
2. **Developing a Fear Hierarchy** Together with the client, the therapist develops a list of situations related to the phobia, ranked from least to most frightening.
3. **Relaxation Exercises** Clients are taught relaxation techniques that will be used during the exposure session.
4. **Graded Exposure** The client begins to confront situations in the fear hierarchy, starting with the least fearful, while applying relaxation techniques to reduce anxiety.
5. **Repetition and Reinforcement** This process is repeated until the client is comfortable with each level of exposure, and the anxiety response is significantly reduced.

Systematic desensitization has been supported by numerous studies showing its effectiveness in reducing symptoms of phobias and anxiety disorders. Through relaxation and gradual exposure, clients learn to face their fears in a safe and controlled manner, which can ultimately lead to reduced anxiety and improved emotional well-being.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of adolescents undergoing systematic desensitization therapy for specific phobias. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret their own experiences (Creswell, 2013), exploring perceptions, challenges, and emotional and cognitive changes experienced by adolescents during therapy (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The subjects of the study involved three adolescents from a high school in Surabaya with specific phobias of animals AL (arachnophobia), RB (ophidiophobia), and DW (katsaridaphobia). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation during therapy, and analysis of documentation and personal journals (Patton, 2015). Data analysis used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the meaning of adolescents' therapy experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The validity of the study was ensured through data triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting data analysis using *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* IPA, the following emergent theme data was obtained:

Table 1. Research participants' emergent themes

Participant	Emergent Themes
AL participants	Anxiety, initial, high, stimulus, mild, technique, relaxation, fluctuation, anxiety, stage, medium, support, therapist, increase, comfort, confidence, self, reduction, anxiety
RB participants	Anxiety, trust, increase, stimulus, self, light, technique, therapist, stage, comfort, beginning, middle, relaxation, high, anxiety, support, reduction, fluctuation, anxiety, acceptance, strategy, meditation, attention, mindfulness, ability
DW participants	Comfort, stimulus, anxiety, acceptance, relaxation, mindfulness, trust, therapy, technique, ability, reduction, increase, self, beginning, meditation, support, stage, fluctuation, high, anxiety, strategy, mild, attention, medium, anxiety, belief, focus, breathing, energy.

During systematic desensitization therapy, the three teenagers will undergo a process of gradual exposure to their phobic stimulus, combined with relaxation techniques. Their subjective experiences during therapy may include:

1. Early Stages of High Anxiety and Initial Management

In the early stages of therapy, adolescents showed high levels of anxiety when exposed to relatively mild phobic stimuli. This is a common reaction found in the literature, where individuals with specific phobias often experience increased anxiety at the beginning of exposure (Brown et al., 2021). However, with the help of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, they were able to manage this anxiety and gradually reduce its intensity. A study by Brown et al. (2021) supports this finding by showing that relaxation techniques are effective in reducing initial anxiety, allowing participants to adapt more easily to desensitization therapy.

2. Intermediate Stage Anxiety Fluctuations and Therapist Support

As the intensity of the stimulus increases, adolescents experience fluctuations in their anxiety levels during the middle stage of therapy. Increased anxiety at some point is a common challenge, and therapist support becomes especially important at this stage. A study by Kim et al. (2020) showed that fluctuations in anxiety are a common phenomenon during gradual exposure, and consistent therapist support can help participants cope with peaks in anxiety, increasing the effectiveness of therapy. These findings emphasize the importance of the therapist's role in providing emotional support and effective coping strategies during the middle stage of therapy.

3. Final Stage of Increasing Comfort and Reducing Avoidance

In the final stage of therapy, adolescents began to feel more comfortable and confident in dealing with their phobic stimuli. They experienced significant reductions in anxiety levels and avoidance behaviors. A study by Zhao et al. (2021) supports these findings by showing that in the final stage of therapy, participants reported increased comfort and acceptance of previously feared stimuli, as well as reduced avoidance behaviors. These findings underscore the effectiveness of systematic desensitization in producing lasting positive changes in the lives of adolescents undergoing therapy.

Overall, the findings of this study and supporting research suggest that systematic desensitization therapy combined with relaxation techniques and therapist support can effectively reduce anxiety and improve quality of life for adolescents with specific phobias.

5. DISCUSSION

Anxiety Experience and Its Management

a. the anxiety felt is high

AL participants with arachnophobia experienced extreme anxiety about spiders, as demonstrated by physical responses such as rapid heartbeat and cold sweats when exposed to stimuli such as words, images, or objects that resembled spiders. Extreme avoidance behaviors included throwing objects at spiders and refusing to enter rooms with spider webs.

b. Experiences of anxiety vary from mild to high.

Since I was little, I have been very afraid of spiders. Even just hearing the word 'spider' makes me shiver. When I see a spider in person or a picture of one, my heart beats faster, my hands sweat, and my body trembles. Once I saw a spider in my room, I immediately panicked and threw my sandals at it without thinking. I also often avoid rooms with spider webs. It feels like I can't breathe calmly. I know this may be an exaggeration, but I really can't control that fear. I try to avoid it as much as possible because the anxiety that arises really interferes with my daily activities .” interview November 13, 2022

Intense anxiety reactions, such as those experienced by RB, an individual with ophidiophobia, which is an excessive fear of snakes. This anxiety does not only appear when seeing snakes directly, but also when seeing images or other visuals that resemble snakes.

“When I see a snake, I immediately feel panic. My heart beats really fast, my hands shake, and I find it hard to breathe. Even just seeing a snake on TV or in a picture makes me feel uneasy. I remember one day, when I was walking in the garden with a friend, I saw a snake

pass by, and I immediately screamed and ran away. Since then, I have completely avoided places like parks or gardens where there might be snakes. It feels like a huge threat, even though the snake may be small or harmless. I know this fear is irrational, but the anxiety I feel is very real and difficult to control ." interview November 14, 2022

DW experiences intense anxiety about cockroaches, both directly and visually, which causes feelings of disgust, panic, and avoidance of places such as the kitchen or storeroom.

"Every time I see a cockroach, I immediately feel disgusted and panicked. My heart beats fast, my hands sweat, and I feel very uncomfortable. Even the sound of a cockroach flying makes me run away from that place. There was one incident when I was in the kitchen, a cockroach suddenly appeared near my feet, and I immediately screamed and jumped onto the chair. Since then, I am always careful when entering the kitchen or the storeroom because I am afraid of cockroaches. This fear is very disturbing, even though I know that cockroaches are not really dangerous. However, the feelings of disgust and panic that arise are difficult to control, so I prefer to avoid places where there are potential cockroaches." interview November 15, 2022

Participants experienced reduced anxiety at various stages.

Despite having a deep anxiety towards spiders, Informant AL showed an open attitude and courage to face his fear. AL did not feel depressed with the phobia he experienced, but tried to face and manage it through therapy and gradual exposure. AL had the determination to continue to increase comfort in facing this phobia, although sometimes he still felt anxious.

" At first, I was very afraid of spiders, even just hearing the word 'spider' made me anxious. When I first tried to encounter one, my heart beat very fast, and my body broke out in a cold sweat. I even threw things at the spider to avoid contact. However, with the training I did with the therapist, I began to feel more in control. In the beginning, I still felt strong anxiety, but the more I was exposed to them in controlled conditions, the more comfortable I began to feel. Now, although I still feel afraid, my anxiety has decreased, and I can remain calm in some situations that used to be very scary." interview November 13, 2022

Like AL, RB has a determined attitude in dealing with her phobia of snakes. Although strong feelings of anxiety still exist, RB does not let it stop her from living her daily life. With ongoing therapy, RB continues to work on managing her fears, and self-acceptance is key to reducing the impact of her phobia on her life. RB *"In the past, when I saw a snake, I would panic, even a picture of a snake would make me feel very anxious. I often avoided parks or gardens, because I was worried there would be snakes there. However, after undergoing*

gradual therapy, I started to feel calmer. At first, my anxiety was still very high, and I felt like I couldn't deal with it. However, with the controlled exposure approach, I slowly started to feel a reduction in my anxiety. Although I still avoid some places, now I can stay calm if I see a snake from a distance or in a picture." interview November 14, 2022

DW also showed an attitude of not giving up easily even though his fear of cockroaches was very disruptive to his daily activities. With determination and therapy, DW tried to reduce the existing anxiety.

"My fear of cockroaches is very disturbing. When I see a cockroach, I feel disgusted and panic, and I immediately want to leave the place. In the past, I avoided the kitchen and the storeroom because I was afraid of cockroaches. But with the therapy I underwent, my anxiety began to decrease. At first, I still felt very scared and panicked, but with gradual anxiety management, I began to feel more in control. Now, although my anxiety has not completely disappeared, I can deal with it better without having to panic." interview November 15, 2022

The Meaning of Applying Techniques and Support in Managing Anxiety

a. Relaxation, meditation, and breathing techniques are the main methods in managing anxiety.

1. Informant Initials: AL (Arachnophobia)

"Initially, my anxiety was very high when I saw spiders, even the word 'spider' alone made me feel anxious. I felt a rapid heartbeat and cold sweats. However, after undergoing therapy involving breathing techniques and meditation, I began to feel changes. This therapy helped me calm down and reduce the anxiety that arose. I also learned to focus on my breathing and try not to think about spiders too much. Although the fear is still there, I can be calmer when faced with situations that used to be very scary for me." interview November 13, 2022

2. Informant Initials RB (Ophidiophobia)

"I used to feel very anxious whenever I saw a snake, even a picture of a snake was enough to scare me. However, after I tried relaxation techniques like meditation and mindfulness, I started to feel a little more in control. Whenever the anxiety came, I tried to focus on my breathing, and that helped me calm down. I also practiced mindfulness, trying not to get caught up in negative thoughts related to snakes. Although my anxiety hasn't completely gone, I can deal with it more calmly than before." interview November 14, 2022

3. Informant Initials DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"My anxiety about cockroaches is very strong. When I see a cockroach, I feel panic and want to leave the place immediately. However, after trying meditation and breathing relaxation techniques, I feel better. Meditation helps me to calm my mind and body, while breathing techniques slow down my heart rate. I also learned to stay calm and focus on my breathing when anxiety comes. I still feel afraid of cockroaches, but these techniques help me reduce the panic that arises." interview November 15, 2022

Support from therapists

a. Informant Initials AL (Arachnophobia)

"I found my anxiety very difficult to overcome on my own. The support of my therapist really helped me understand my body's response to my fear of spiders. She taught me breathing techniques that helped me calm down when my fears arose. Each session with my therapist was a safe space to talk about my fears without feeling judged, which was very liberating. With her guidance, I also learned to challenge the negative thoughts that were making my fears worse. Now, although the fear is not completely gone, I am more confident in dealing with situations that used to be very scary." interview November 13, 2022

b. Informant Initials RB (Ophidiophobia)

"I used to feel alone in dealing with my fear of snakes. My therapist helped me by giving me an understanding that this phobia can be managed. The support I received was invaluable, especially when my therapist accompanied me through gradual exposure therapy. At every step, I felt safe because there was someone to guide me and make sure I didn't feel overwhelmed. In addition, my therapist also helped me develop strategies to cope with anxiety, such as using grounding techniques and deep breathing. Slowly, my fear began to diminish, and I felt more able to cope with anxiety when seeing snakes or pictures of snakes ." interview November 14, 2022

c. Informant Initials DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"When I first sought help, I had no idea that support from a therapist could be this effective. The therapist helped me understand why I reacted with panic whenever I saw a cockroach. We worked together to build tolerance for my fear. One of the most memorable experiences was when the therapist used simulations to help me deal with cockroaches more calmly. I felt less alone in this process, and the therapist's guidance made me feel more

confident. The therapist also taught me relaxation techniques that I could use immediately when my fear arose. All of this helped reduce my anxiety, although it hasn't completely gone away." interview November 15, 2022

The social environment makes a significant contribution to anxiety management.

a. Informant Initials AL (Arachnophobia)

"At first, I felt alone with my fear of spiders. However, my family and close friends began to understand my phobia after I opened up about my experiences. They helped create a more comfortable environment, such as making sure there were no pictures of spiders in the house. Their emotional support was crucial when my anxiety increased. Hearing reassuring words or just their presence made me feel calmer. I also felt stronger knowing that the people around me respected my feelings and didn't take my fear for granted ." interview November 13, 2022

b. Informant Initials RB (Ophidiophobia)

"Support from family and friends has been very helpful in managing my fear of snakes. They avoid bringing pictures of snakes or talking about snakes in front of me. When I feel anxious, they remind me to use the breathing techniques taught by the therapist. I am greatly helped by a social environment that understands and supports me, because it gives me a sense of security and makes me more confident in facing scary situations. My friends also often motivate me to continue practicing overcoming this fear slowly." interview November 14, 2022

c. Informant Initials DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"My social circle played a big role in helping me manage my fear of cockroaches. My family was very supportive, especially in making sure that the kitchen and storage room were kept clean to minimize my risk of encountering cockroaches. They were also very patient when I panicked and helped me distract myself. I remember one of my friends calmly helping me use grounding techniques when I suddenly saw a cockroach in her house. This support made me feel less alone, and I was better able to deal with my anxiety with peace of mind knowing that there were people who cared and understood me." interview November 15, 2022

Increased Comfort, Self-confidence helps participants to better manage anxiety, Focus on self, acceptance.

Comfort development

a. Informant Initials AL (Arachnophobia)

"I feel like a big change has happened after some time of therapy and support from my family. At first, just hearing the word 'spider' made me panic. However, after practicing relaxation techniques and slowly exposing myself to pictures of spiders, I started to feel more comfortable. Now, even though I still have fear, I can be calmer. I can even sit in a room with a picture of a small spider without running away. That's a big improvement that gives me more confidence." interview November 13, 2022

Informant Initials: RB (Ophidiophobia)

"I used to not be able to walk through the park without imagining a snake. But after a few therapy sessions and talking to supportive friends, I started to develop ways to manage my fear. I stopped overthinking things and focused more on what was in front of me. Now, I can walk through the park more calmly, although I am still wary. The resulting sense of ease makes my life feel more normal, without the constant feeling of anxiety." interview November 14, 2022

Informant Initials: DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"The biggest change I felt was when I started to believe that I could control my fear of cockroaches. I followed the therapist's advice to use breathing techniques and try to get used to things that previously triggered disgust. For example, I started to be brave enough to clean the kitchen by myself. It was difficult at first, but now I can be more comfortable in spaces that I previously avoided. I feel stronger and no longer immediately panic when I see a small cockroach. That's a big step forward for me." interview November 15, 2022

Self-confidence helps participants to better manage anxiety.

a. Informant Initials: AL (Arachnophobia)

"At first, I felt helpless whenever I saw a spider, even in a picture. However, after undergoing therapy and trying to face my fears gradually, I started to feel a little more confident. My first courage was to stay in the room even though I saw a small spider in the corner. Although the fear is still there, I am proud of this progress. The confidence has made me more motivated to keep trying, and now I feel more able to control my reactions without immediately panicking." interview November 13, 2022

b. Informant Initials: RB (Ophidiophobia)

"When I started therapy, I always felt that my fear of snakes would never change. However, with time and practice, I began to see small changes, such as being able to look at a picture of a snake without closing my eyes. The feeling of being able to face my fears increased my confidence. Now, I know that anxiety can be controlled, as long as I believe in my own abilities. I began to believe that this fear would not always dominate my life, and that belief helped reduce the panic that used to arise." interview November 14, 2022

c. Informant Initials: DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"In the past, every time I saw a cockroach, I would immediately panic and feel inadequate. I couldn't even imagine being near a cockroach without screaming. However, after undergoing relaxation exercises and starting to change the way I think, my confidence grew. I felt stronger when I managed to stay calm even when I saw a small cockroach on the floor. It made me believe that I could continue to learn and become better at managing my fears. This confidence is the key that makes me feel more empowered, no longer a victim of anxiety." interview November 15, 2022

Focus on yourself

a. Informant Initials: AL (Arachnophobia)

"I learned that focusing on how I was feeling, rather than on the spider, was very helpful. I started to notice my breathing patterns and how my heart would beat faster when I felt anxious. By shifting my attention to slower, deeper breathing, I was able to reduce my panic. This technique made me more aware of myself rather than being constantly afraid of the spider. It gave me more control over my emotions." interview November 13, 2022

b. Informant Initials RB (Ophidiophobia)

"I used to worry about what might happen if I encountered a snake, even when I was just walking in the park. My therapist suggested that I focus on what I can control, like my own feelings. Now, I try to pay attention to my body's reactions, and instead of thinking about the snake, I focus on calming myself with positive thoughts. This makes me feel more connected to myself, and I start to believe that I can face my fears." interview November 14, 2022

c. Informant Initials DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"Whenever I saw a cockroach, my mind would immediately focus on how disgusting they were, and I felt helpless. I learned that by focusing on myself—recognizing my fear and my body's response—I could take control. I started using grounding techniques by touching something comfortable or naming things around me to distract myself. This helped me focus on myself, not the cockroach. This made me stronger in the face of my fear." interview November 15, 2022

Reception

a. Informant Initials: AL (Arachnophobia)

"At first, I felt ashamed of my fear of spiders. I always avoided it and thought that this phobia was a shameful weakness. However, during therapy, I was taught to accept that fear is a part of me that needs to be understood, not fought. This acceptance helped me to be calmer when facing scary situations. When I stopped blaming myself, I started to feel lighter and could focus on small steps to overcome my anxiety." interview November 13, 2022

b. Informant Initials: RB (Ophidiophobia)

"I always felt that my fear of snakes made me weak and different from other people. I often felt frustrated with myself. But after talking to a therapist, I began to realize that accepting this fear as part of my experience was an important step. I learned that acceptance doesn't mean giving up, but rather acknowledging that I have limits that I can manage. This made me more patient with myself and more confident that I could learn to live with it without having to force instant change." interview November 14, 2022

c. Informant Initials DW (Katsaridaphobia)

"I used to feel so angry and ashamed every time I panicked when I saw a cockroach. I always wanted to get rid of that fear immediately. But then I realized that accepting my fear is the first step to freeing myself from panic. I started to be more honest with myself that this phobia is part of my journey. With this acceptance, I became calmer and started to believe that the process of change takes time, and that's okay." interview November 15, 2022

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study effectively demonstrates that systematic desensitization therapy, when combined with relaxation techniques and social support, can reduce anxiety experienced by adolescents with specific phobias and improve their quality of life. Specific phobias, such as arachnophobia, ophidiophobia, and katsaridaphobia, often cause significant disruption to adolescents' daily lives and emotional well-being. Through a process of gradual exposure coupled with relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and meditation, the adolescents in this study were able to manage their initial anxiety and reduce avoidance behaviors. Support from therapists and social circles proved to be crucial in their recovery journey, helping them feel calmer and more confident. Accepting their fears and focusing on managing negative thoughts also played a role in helping adolescents deal with their fears more effectively. Overall, an empathetic and systematic approach allowed adolescents to feel more empowered in managing the fears that interfere with their daily lives.

Suggestions for further researchers

1. Wider Application of Relaxation Techniques Systematic desensitization therapy can be more effective if it is reinforced with a variety of relaxation techniques tailored to individual needs. Intensive training in these techniques before beginning exposure can increase the emotional readiness of adolescents.
2. Increasing Social Support Strengthening social support networks, including friends and family, can provide adolescents with more emotional resources to deal with their fears. Group support programs and family involvement in the therapy process can be helpful adjuncts. please make it a narrative

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