

This Week's Citation Classic

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Davison G C. Systematic desensitization as a counterconditioning process. *J. Abnormal Psychol.* 73:91-9, 1968.
[State Univ. New York, Stony Brook, NY]

If systematic desensitization derives its effectiveness from a counterconditioning process, then disrupting the pairing of relaxation with imaginal aversive stimuli should significantly reduce the efficacy of the procedure in eliminating unrealistic fears. The experiment reported here supported that hypothesis. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI[™]) indicates that this paper has been cited over 170 times since 1968. Of these, 37 occurred within two years of publication.]

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"True to the Chance Theory of Life, I went to Stanford in 1962 to specialize in social psychology, only to switch to physiological and finally to settle on clinical. This happened because I learned there for the first time of an approach to clinical psychology that aligned itself epistemologically (and spiritually) with general experimental psychology. The idea that one could be an experimentalist *and* a clinician was new to me, though it should not have been, had I been well-read in the history of clinical psychology. I doubt I would have elected clinical otherwise.

"The basic idea of this dissertation study was fairly simple. If systematic desensitization was effective because of counterconditioning (i.e., enabling people to substitute a fearless response for a fearful one), then disrupting the presumed necessary pairing of fear with relaxation should significantly reduce its potency.

"For several months my entire life had been organized around the pleasant drive from

Stanford to Foothill Junior College in Los Altos Hills, where some good-natured instructors had given me access to a pool of undergraduates willing to expose themselves to something they found loathsome and frightening. My world was defined by a storage closet, a reclining chair for subjects to relax in, and a tape recorder to provide standardized instructions. It was exhilarating, and became even more so when, after treatment, most of the desensitization subjects—having learned to tolerate images of holding a nonpoisonous snake without becoming anxious—actually approached the creature they had been unable to get close to prior to the treatment. Control subjects did not fare so well. I was frankly surprised and delighted to see this happen under reasonably controlled laboratory conditions.

"My dissertation, on which the article was based, became known in behavior therapy circles rather quickly, perhaps because there had been till that time few persuasive demonstrations of applying learning principles to the amelioration of psychological suffering. The experiment was also an early example of how one could dismantle a therapy procedure to examine its theoretical underpinnings. I believe too that my study gladdened the hearts of those who wanted to believe that clinical psychology could be truly scientific.

"It was not long afterward that people, including myself, began to critique what I had done, nor did many years pass before I began to doubt the implications of the study and of the conditioning bases of behavior therapy generally. No matter. It was good to have been a true believer in graduate school and for a year or two thereafter. And it is certainly immensely gratifying to know that this article has been referred to so often by colleagues, even though many of the more recent citations are, I believe, critical in nature."^{1,2}

1. **Kazdin A E & Wilcoxon L A.** Systematic desensitization and nonspecific treatment effects. A methodological approach *Psychol. Bull.* 83:729-58, 1976.
2. **Borkovec T D & O'Brien G T.** Methodological and target behavior issues in analogue therapy outcome research. (Hersen M, Eisler R M & Miller P M. eds.) *Progress in behavior modification.* New York: Academic Press. 197b. p. 133-72.