



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**EXPERIMENT**

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Definition: An activity a client carries out during or between therapy sessions in order to test an idea about thoughts/feelings or to discover or become aware of new therapeutic information.

Elements: In discussion with the therapist, the client designs new activities (experiments) to try during or between sessions. The activities may test hypotheses in any area. They usually concern: in anxiety, over-estimations of danger; in depression, overly negative views of the self, world, and future. Interpersonal experiments concern how the client or others might react to his/her new behavior. Awareness experiments may include discovering how s/he responds to a new situation about which s/he has no preconceptions.

Related procedures: *Assignments; homework; cognitive restructuring; exposure; programmed practice; empty-chair technique; two-chair technique; guided discovery/fantasy/imagery; psychodrama; rehearsal; role-play; shaping; successive approximation.*

Application: Usually in individual therapy, sometimes with couples or groups.

1st use? 'Experiment' first denoted exercises to increase awareness and growth (Perls et al., 1951), and later denoted hypothesis-testing (Beck et al. 1979).

References:

1. Arkowitz H (2003) An integrative approach to psychotherapy based on common processes of change. In F Kaslow (Ed.) *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychotherapy, Vol. 4, Integrative and Eclectic Therapies*, J Lebow (Ed.), p317-337. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
2. Beck AT, Rush JA, Shaw BR, Emery G (1979) *Cognitive therapy for depression*. New York: Guilford Publications.
3. Perls FS, Hefferline RF, Goodman P (1951) *Gestalt therapy: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. New York: The Julian Press.
4. Greenberg, L.S., Rice, L.N., & Elliott, R. (1993). *Facilitating emotional change: The moment-by-moment process*. New York: Guilford.

Case Illustrations

1. Hypothesis-testing experiment (Arkowitz 2003)

A young woman with panic and agoraphobia tested her idea that if she tried to get to a shopping mall she would panic so she wouldn't even get out of the car. She was to report her feelings while anticipating all stages towards entering a mall as far as she could get (*imaginal exposure*). Her husband drove her to the mall (*live exposure*) and remained in the car in the parking lot while she stood just inside the mall entrance for 10 minutes and found that anticipating entering the mall made her more anxious than actually being in the mall (*homework; cognitive restructuring; live exposure; programmed practice; shaping; successive approximation*). After standing at the entrance for a few minutes she became far less anxious than she had anticipated, which

encouraged her to do more. In subsequent days, she was able to enter the mall and spend time shopping there. Had she been too anxious to actually go to the mall, she would have examined her feelings when thinking of trying to do so.

## 2. Proposed hypothesis-testing experiment (Arkowitz 2003)

A young man with a flying phobia sought psychotherapy saying he wanted to join his wife on some of her trips. In the therapist's office he did imaginal exposure but resisted doing live exposure, even as minimal as a proposed experiment to drive to the airport with the therapist and see what he felt while sitting in the car watching planes take off (*homework; cognitive restructuring; exposure; programmed practice; shaping, successive approximation*). He thought this would not make him particularly anxious, and finally admitted his unhappiness in the marriage and reluctance to spend more time with his wife than he had to. After discussing this, he and his wife sought marriage counseling.

## 3. Awareness experiment (Arkowitz 2003)

A woman sought help for depression and guilt 2 months after she had inadvertently caused a car accident in which a driver (Steve) died. His family blamed her for his death even though she was not at fault; they banned her from attending Steve's funeral, making it harder for her to mourn his death. In therapy session 6 she seemed to speak to him directly and agreed to a two-chair experiment in which she spoke as herself and as Steve at various times (*empty-chair technique; guided discovery/fantasy/imagery; psychodrama; rehearsal; role-play*). This experiment took part of each of the next 5 sessions. The therapist suggested that she switch roles as needed and say how she felt (e.g. "Tell 'Steve' how that makes you feel"). At first, she was apologetic and guilt-ridden, and 'Steve' was angry, aggressive, and critical of her. Then she said she was sorry for what happened but it wasn't her fault and she wanted him to stop harassing her. Her exchange became more heated with her often asking "What do you want from me?" 'Steve' surprised her by saying he wanted her to have a 'ritual' for him, and she began to cry. In the next week she went to his grave in the evening, bringing a candle which she lit and placed on the headstone while she read a poem she had written for the occasion. These events seemed central to her eventual recovery.