

60 Minute Prolonged Exposure Sessions

Prolonged Exposure therapy (PE) is a highly recommended treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and has robust evidence supporting its effectiveness. The standard PE protocol was developed for 90-minute sessions with the imaginal exposure component lasting 45-60 minutes starting in Session 3 and continuing through the end of treatment. However, some MTF Behavioral Health Clinics report barriers to offering 90-minute sessions. While creating 90-minute sessions may require a shift in clinic operations, we strongly recommend that clinics make the necessary adjustments to enable 90-minute template slots for standard PE, especially for providers new to using PE. However, if circumstances require a more restricted template, we support the use of modified, 60-minute sessions as an alternative to foregoing PE altogether. This handout provides guidance for shorter sessions.

Protocol Modification

- The PE session should be a full 60 minutes in length in order to ensure the key components of PE are completed.
- When a thorough trauma interview has been completed prior to beginning PE, Session 1 of PE can often be finished in 60 minutes. If not, then Session 1 of PE may be broken into two parts (Session 1a and Session 1b).
 - Session 1a: Overview & rationale, trauma interview, homework (reading)
 - Session 1b: Review of overview & rationale, relaxed breathing, homework (breathing practice)
- Session 2 is separated into two appointments
 - Session 2a: Review homework/ self-reports, common reactions to trauma, homework (reading)
 - Session 2b: Review homework/ self-reports, rationale for in vivo exposure, Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS), construct in vivo hierarchy, instructions for in vivo exposure, homework (in vivo practice)
- Beginning in session 3, imaginal exposure should be facilitated for at least 25-30 minutes, taking care to leave adequate time afterward for processing (at least 10 to 15 minutes). Failing to immediately process the imaginal exposure may negatively impact PTSD symptom resolution and can leave patients in a heightened state of arousal when leaving the session.
- While limited, the current research literature does not support extending the total number of PE sessions beyond the recommended 8-15 number of sessions.

The research examining the necessary length of imaginal exposure within PE sessions is limited. However, two early studies looking at a 60 minute session with shortened imaginal exposure are promising and additional research is ongoing.

References

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