Reviewer's report

Title: Interoceptive hypersensitivity and interoceptive exposure in panic disorder: specificity and effectiveness

Version: 1 Date: 15 May 2006

Reviewer: Richard P Swinson

Reviewer's report:

General

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The report contains two studies in a group of subjects with panic disorder and agoraphobia (PDA). The first study is an assessment of the self report of the effects of 9 interoceptive exposure (IE) techniques on:- the level of discomfort produced by each IE task, the similarity to the non-provoked panic experience and the level of fear produced. The second study is an outcome treatment study based on the use of Andrews et al (2003) treatment manuals for PDA.

The clinical sample is well characterized through standard assessments methods. The sample size is given as 98 at baseline. It is not clear why the pre-treatment baseline sample size is reduced to 71. No explanation is given of the reasons for dropout and no information is available regarding potential differences between the original 98 and the experimental 71. The final sample size is reported as 43 due to "missing data". There is no information about the reasons for data being missing or the timing of the occurrence of the loss of data. Again there are no data offered comparing the final 43 with the original 98 of the experimental treatment sample of 71.

In the first phase Ss completed IE exercises and rated them on the dimensions above. The items producing distress were then ranked for use in treatment. Although a description of the hierarchy construction is given it is not clear how the hierarchy was used and if Ss began at the top or the bottom of the hierarchy. There is no link between the factor analysis of the Body Sensations Questionnaire (BSQ) at baseline and the triggering of symptoms during the IE exercises. No explanation is given how information was handled when a S had items in their hierarchy that belonged to two different factors.

The four factor solution of the BSQ data offered did not fit with clinical experience nor with data in Antony et al (2006) Ref 5. No IE exercise was found to produce cardio-respiratory distress. Antony et al reported that most of the IE exercises from an overlapping set of exercises triggered both respiratory and cardio vascular symptoms with moderate to high levels of distress. The present authors, although aware of these findings, did not discuss the discrepancies in the two reports. It would help to understand the current findings if the authors would present the data regarding symptom production with respect to each IE exercise that they used as well as the factor analytic data.

The treatment study consisted of twelve sessions of small group based CBT. Andrew's treatment manuals stress the use of breathing exercises and relaxation together with other CBT components. There is no description about how closely the current study adhered to the written model. If it was closely followed then it could be expected that Ss with high discomfort from IE focused on respiration would benefit more than Ss with other symptomatology due to the amount of treatment time given to that symptom complex.

It appears as though 71 Ss entered the treatment study. There is no information about how many completers there were. No information is available about how drop outs or incomplete data were handled. Are the outcome measures based on completers or an ITT sample with LOCF? What were the characteristics of the drop out sample. What were the reasons for drop out/non completion?

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
The term "Thoracic breathing" does not have an obvious English language equivalent. Can it be defined please?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.