A Caregiver’s Guide to Make Health Visits Easier with Desensitization

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What exactly is systematic desensitization?

- Systematic desensitization is a way to decrease your child’s anxiety and help you overcoming fear about doing things like visiting the doctor or dentist.

- Basically, it is much easier to do something in tiny pieces, step by step, than what we sometimes tend to do – just force a child through something scary so that we can get through it as quickly as possible.
How do You Use Systematic Desensitization

- In order to implement systematic desensitization, the scary experience is first broken down into tiny steps.

- You keep the child relaxed through each little step by using things that they absolutely LOVE (such as a favorite food or cartoon or video game).

- The first step / first piece of the scary experience is presented while the child is very happy and excited to have this favorite food / toy / video.

- The first step / first piece of the scary experience is then taken away before the child gets upset, and maybe before they even notice it.
Example: A Scary Procedure - Getting a Hair Cut

- Many children are afraid to get their hair cut.

- The traditional approach, if the child is afraid and begins to cry / tantrum, has been to hold the child down to cut his hair.

- For children who can use language to communicate, even though this is a scary experience, they may be able to talk to their parents about how it did not actually hurt, and over time be less afraid to get their hair cut.

- For children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder or other communication disorder, they may not be able to use language to understand what is going on, and may continue to experience anxiety and throw tantrums to avoid the scary experience. The tantrums may even get worse, so that you can’t get them out of the car and into the barber shop.
Example: Using Systematic Desensitization for Hair Cutting

- In order to desensitize a child to the experience of having their hair cut, first write down all of the steps to complete the hair cut:
  - Enter the barber shop
  - Sit in the chair
  - Put on the drape
  - Wash the hair
  - Turn on the clippers
  - Run clippers over the head several times to cut hair
  - Blow hair dry
Example: Using Systematic Desensitization for Hair Cutting

- Next, identify something portable that the child REALLY loves, such as their favorite cartoon on an iPad, or their favorite food. For example, we will pretend that our child REALLY loves soda pop, and they don’t get it very often at home.

- Then, take the first step in the process:
  - Enter the barber shop

- Give them the REALLY loved experience (hand them a soda pop) while walking them past the barber shop.
Example: Using Systematic Desensitization for Hair Cutting

- Were we successful?

- If they can walk past the barber shop without showing signs of anxiety, because they are so excited about the soda pop, great! Go home, and next time we will try steps 1 and steps 2.

- If the child does display anxiety, we need to back up and figure out how to break step 1 into smaller steps, such as just driving past the parking lot where the barber shop is located but not getting out of the car yet.

- Either way, we just do the first step today, and how well it works determines whether we move forward or backward on our list of steps at our next visit.
Example: Using Systematic Desensitization for Hair Cutting

- Using systematic desensitization means that it will take at least as many visits as there are steps in our process. If some of the steps don’t work (meaning that the child displays anxiety during this step and the favorite stimulus is not enough to keep them calm and happy) then we will need to back up and have at least another visit, while we break that anxiety-producing step down into an easier step.

- Not all of these steps have to be done AT the barber shop

- We might be able to use a pair of clippers at home, and let the child see them, touch them, listen to them turn on and off while drinking soda pop

- The goal is to help the child associate this potentially scary experience with their FAVORITE experience.
Another action we can take to help systematic desensitization reduce anxiety effectively is to use pictures to show a child what will happen in each step.

We can use this list of pictures, and combine it with very fun things, to teach the child the order of events to complete an activity.

For children who have a communication disorder, not understanding how much longer something will last or what will happen next may increase their fear.

Knowing the pattern of what will happen, and being able to see how many steps are left, may help a child complete a potentially stressful activity with less fear and better behavior.
How Can We Use This For Medical and Dental Procedures?

- Parents and healthcare providers need to work together to help use systematic desensitization.

- Health care providers can provide lists of the steps that need to be completed, and can use pictures to help patients understand what is going to happen next.

- Parents can schedule desensitization pre-visits, bringing the child to the health care office several times to go through each step of the examination process, and use favorite things to make each visit a pleasant experience for the child.

- Once a child has completed desensitization, they may not continue to need so many pre-visits. By using systematic desensitization and pictures, we can help patients understand what needs to be done and trust the adults involved that this will be ok.
But that sounds like it takes so long!

- Yes, there are sometimes many visits involved in completing systematic desensitization correctly.

- However, once systematic desensitization has been done correctly, parents and health care providers don’t have to worry about holding down a frightened, angry child, who may grow bigger and stronger but not less frightened and angry as they get older.

- Effective systematic desensitization makes it easier to complete routine procedures, which may help improve a child’s health and reduce the need for restraint / sedation as an adolescent or adult.
So what next?

- Now that you know what systematic desensitization is, here’s what to do next:

  1. Identify the procedure that you’re your child needs to complete, and get a list of the steps for that procedure (you may need your health care provider to help you).

  2. Get as many pictures as possible about what this visit will look like.

  3. Identify some FAVORITE things (favorite videos, favorite handheld games, favorite foods) that might help keep your patient very happy for the 5 minutes that it takes to complete a desensitization step

  4. Schedule desensitization visits for each step; keep it SHORT and FUN!

  5. Use a checklist to keep track of child’s progress until they have completed everything that they need to do for the scheduled procedure.