Abstract

In this study we compared the efficacy of virtual reality exposure combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy (VRET) to that of traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) alone in reducing phobic symptoms in a sample of patients with long-term agoraphobia. The study was a between-subject design with three experimental conditions (VRET group, N = 30; CBT group, N = 30; and medication only group, N = 20) and repeated measures (pre-treatment, post-treatment, and six-month follow-up). All patients were receiving antidepressant medication. Results showed that all therapies were statistically effective both at post-treatment and six-month follow-up. The VRET group showed clinical improvement in most variables measured at follow-up. The CBT group showed the highest dropout rates. These results are discussed pointing out that VRET probably serves as an intermediate procedure for an efficient exposure to phobic stimuli. Besides describing the advantages of VRET for the treatment of agoraphobia symptoms in cost-benefit terms, the study also considered issues related to higher treatment adherence and motivation.

Keywords

Agoraphobia; Virtual reality; Cognitive-behavioral therapy; Antidepressants; Experimental study.