

Mini-EdPsych Q & A – Dr. Martin Drapeau

Psychotherapy: Facing your fears:

When virtual reality becomes reality!

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How soon should a parent seek help for a child who has panic attacks?

Parents should seek help as soon as possible. Seeing a psychologist will help determine if the child truly suffers from an anxiety disorder, including panic attacks. If the child does not present with an actual anxiety disorder, then the psychologist will refer you to the appropriate services. Early intervention is always the key to prompt remission and recovery. If you do not know a psychologist, a good place to start is to call the Referral Service of the Order of Psychologists of Quebec at 514-738-1223 or 1-800-561-1223.

What are the causes of phobias? Do children outgrow phobias or do they continue and worsen in adulthood?

It is generally accepted that genetics play an important role in anxiety disorders. However, while genetics may predispose an individual to develop an anxiety disorder, it is rarely the actual cause of the disorder. Likewise, certain personality traits or cognitive styles can increase the risk of developing an anxiety disorder. In children, it often appears that the phobia is related to a painful or traumatic event. For example, because children have fewer experiences to draw from than adults, a single dog bite may be enough to cause a true phobia of dogs in a child. Children may also learn to be afraid of an object through their parents (e.g. through “imitation”).

While there are certain fears that are common in specific age groups, true phobias tend to persist if they are not treated. Research suggests that a phobia resolves spontaneously in about 20% of individuals.

When trying to desensitize a patient of irrational fears, how does virtual exposure translate into a cure in the real world?

For those who are able to “enter” the virtual world, i.e. who have a sense of “presence” in the virtual environment, the real world does not appear to be more problematic than the virtual environment. In other words, any progress made in a virtual environment will also be observed in the real world. Let us not forget that virtual reality is not the treatment per se. It is merely a tool, one of many, used to treat anxiety disorders.