Subjective Units of Distress Scale - SUDS

SUDS is an acronym that describes the Subjective Units of Distress Scale that is used in systematic desensitization for people with phobias and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Background

Systematic Desensitization (SD) was developed by Joseph Wolpe, MD in the 1950's and described in his 1958 book, "Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition". Dr. Wolpe developed a 10-point SUDS to treat what was then described as “War Neurosis”, currently described as posttraumatic stress disorder.

The basic idea in SD is that phobias and trauma-induced avoidant behaviors that had been inadvertently conditioned as uncontrollable psychophysiologic responses could be inhibited by gradually exploring a hierarchy of imagined approximations to the original event or triggering cue while simultaneously maintaining a level of low physiological arousal through progressive muscle relaxation. While moving through a distress hierarchy in which anxiety-producing memories are systematically explored, a client monitors his or her bodily indicators of anxiety.

SUDS is used by the client to systematically gauge the level of distress. At some predetermined point, the client signals the therapist, typically by slightly lifting an index finger, that the distress level is becoming intolerable. At that point, the imaging progression is halted by the therapist and progressive muscle relaxation exercises including breathing to trigger respiratory sinus arrhythmia is used to diminish distress and reestablish an acceptable level of comfort. SUDS is used again by the client to signal when the distress level has successfully decreased and the progressive exposure process can resume.

Systematic Desensitization was refined for use with people who had comorbidities of phobias, posttraumatic stress disorder, brain injury, seizure disorders, and chronic pain by Zev Wanderer, PhD and Donald Cowan, PhD in the early 1970’s at the Center for Behavior Therapy in Beverly Hills, California. Dr. Wanderer and Dr. Cowan successfully treated thousands of patients with these disorders and taught hundreds of professionals at Pepperdine and the UCLA and USC medical school campuses, including Rancho Los Amigos Hospital. Dr. Cowan refined the relaxation techniques to include the use of carbogen, a gas mixture of carbon dioxide and oxygen that promoted rapid induction of deep relaxation through the vagal nervous system.

Popular Version

Currently, several versions of SUDS are available, from 10-point versions to 100-point versions that offer more precise subjective gradations. A popular 10-point version of SUDS is presented below:

10 - Horrible, out of control and overwhelmed. So upset that you can’t imagine how anyone could possibly understand your agitation.

9 - Feeling desperate, almost unbearable and out of control.

8 - Extremely uncomfortable and starting to lose control.

7 - Very uncomfortable but able to maintain control with difficulty.

6 - Upset and uncomfortable; can tolerate the discomfort but wanting to make a change.

5 - Upset and uncomfortable, but still manageable with some effort.

4 - Upset and uncomfortable to the point that it cannot be easily ignored.
3 - Mildly upset and noticeably bothered but tolerable.

2 - A little upset but not noticeable.

1 - Not distressed and feeling good but not great.

0 - Total peace and serenity.

To learn more about systematic desensitization and use of SUDS to successfully treat posttraumatic stress disorder from a Christian perspective, read *Your Faithful Brain: Designed for so Much More!* (Matheson, 2014).