

# Reversing real-life violence desensitization in children

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The result of ongoing exposure to violence leads to desensitization, thus damaged perception of typical interactions and relationships. The growing issue of desensitization to any form of violence is leading to alarming consequences in the overall health of the community. Children who are witnesses or even victims to real-life violence, particularly domestic violence, are experiencing a desensitization to the violence. This consequence results in an altered perception of how others' experience pain and whether or not violence is a solution. The literature lacks research on real-life violence

desensitization and mostly focuses on violence desensitization achieved through media, such as movies and videogames. The gap in the literature of desensitization to real-life violence needs to be addressed in order to overcome this issue that is being more common. Are we able to reverse the effects of desensitization in such a sensitive setting of real-life violence, or is it a permanent alteration? This paper will not include the methodology of the study as the study is still being conducted.

**Key Words:** Violence; Children; Domestic violence; Abuse; Cognitive psychology; Psychology; Clinical neuroscience; Social work; Desensitization; Reversing violence desensitization

## INTRODUCTION

How are we as professionals able to reverse desensitization in children who have witnessed domestic violence and sexual abuse? To narrow the examination of reverse desensitization, my research will focus on children rather than adults who are over the age of 18.

Domestic violence is usually thought to be easily identified by physical marks such as bruises and broken bones, but the pattern of abuse is much deeper than surface damage [1]. Domestic violence is a real threat to victims' lives but also their own psychological health. Not to mention, witnessing such abuse also leaves a major negative impact on the observer, especially when the witness' brain is still developing [2]. Domestic violence involves power imbalance between intimate partners and leads to cognitive distortions, damage of self-worth, and threat to life to the inflicted victim and often the witnesses. A developing mind using this kind of relationship as a first impression of relationships, especially if they are their parents, may be mentally damaging.

The result of ongoing exposure to violence leads to desensitization, thus damaged perception of typical interactions and relationships. It is known that desensitization to violence may lead to the desensitized individual presenting violent behaviors themselves, particularly children who have been introduced and exposed to high levels of violence at a young age [3]. Since violence desensitization is defined as decreased emotional sensitivity and responsiveness due to repeated exposure to violence [4], one would argue that to counteract the effects, removing all triggers (such as aggression, physical violence, and verbal abuse) would reverse desensitization. Most interventions to address this kind of cognitive/behavioral relationship use a reconditioning process, yet this only focuses on violent reversing violence desensitization 4 media as forms of trigger and stimuli [5]. Unfortunately, the research to this specific question is minimal but what literature has included about reversing desensitization is that a reconditioning approach may not be effective [6].

To illustrate, a reconditioning approach would involve unlearning the conditioned response if the stimuli is no longer associated with the trigger [7]. To apply the reconditioning process of desensitizing children to violence in our case, any violent behavior or observations must be removed for a period of time. The downfall and reality about this approach is that it is extremely difficult to remove all violence from a person's life. Media, social

interactions, and even one's thoughts may include violence. Secluding individuals in a controlled environment and only accepting controlled behavior may compromise ethics. Also, people may either return to the desensitized state after exposure of stimuli (violence) returns, or a hypersensitivity occurs as a response to being triggered [8]. Neither outcomes are favored nor healthy to the individual. I am hopeful that findings to the research question are in favor to the health of children.

Domestic violence and desensitization to violence in children is especially relevant to social work practice. Though the research is focused on a micro-level perspective in social work, the findings will benefit all levels of social work practice as violence is an increasingly important social issue. Domestic violence is a common crime that many children witness in their own daily lives or through media [9]. Social workers are ethically bound to report and help victims harmed through domestic violence [10]. Working to reverse desensitization of violence in children is a direct responsibility to social workers as it involves promoting social justice, victim recovery, and even changing (possible or reversing violence desensitization 5 existent) abusers' behaviors and mentality. Also, this research will help educate the public thus creating a more knowledgeable and aware community which will result in members who will work to identify warning signs, empower victims, and help change the abusers to the better.

The aim of this research is to investigate whether or not a process in reversing domestic violence desensitization in children is possible and effective. It will address the nature of domestic violence, the impact it has on children's psyche, and the most significant factors in reconditioning to desensitization.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Desensitization to violence is a process that is described by experiencing a reduced biological and psychological response of arousal to violent triggers and stimuli. This is an excellent definition to desensitization since it expresses how the desensitization is achieved through the internal state, psychological and physiological, teaching the body to respond differently to specific stimuli.

Furthermore, during my research, origins of desensitization to violence include many causes, yet unfortunately, much of the literature does not include studies involving real-life violence let alone domestic violence. However, many research articles discuss relevant causes achieved through

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the media. The literature indicates that media demonstrating aggressive or violent behavior promotes an aggressive state of mind, thus creating violent behaviors in viewers.

Nonetheless, I will discuss the brief literature found on real-life violence. An article published by Mrug et al. explains that repeated exposure to violence leads to reversing violence desensitization 6 desensitization to violence, yet long-term consequences are yet to be known. The study followed a community sample of pre-adolescents and asked them to report their levels of exposure to violence. The results indicated that those exposed to high levels of violence early on in adolescence grew to have violent behavior around the age of 18. This study suggests that exposure to violence does in fact impact one's perspectives as well as responses in a manner that promotes violence. The study then goes on to explain that those who are exposed to violence will illicit emotional reactions. Yet if the exposure is prolonged and repeated, the stimuli (violence) becomes a habitual and responses lessen over exposure time until little to none emotional responses are illicit.

In addition, while Mrug et al. investigated how viewing a lot of violence in the media impacts children's aggressive behaviors, their findings expressed that children exposed to the high levels of violence show high levels of aggression. In contrast, low levels of distress occur when witnessing or exposed to violence. To ponder on these findings, we understand that violence in these individuals is not a topic that bothers them after desensitization has been achieved. We can infer that desensitization creates negative effects in the undesirable behavior as well as undesirable responses are produced in result to high levels and prolonged exposure to aggression and violence.

Another study, conducted by Di Tella et al. examined crime and violence in a lab. During the study, researchers exposed a group of adult subjects to videos of real crime while they showed videos of non-crime related to the control group. After viewing the videos, researchers noted changes in cortisol levels, heart rate, as well as cognitive controls. Not surprisingly, those who were previously victimized to violence and watched the real-crime videos showed no significance in measures and even were similar to the measures of the control group watching the reversing violence desensitization 7 non-crime related videos [11]. Results suggest an indication in those who have been pre-exposed to violence have achieved habituation to crime exposure, which is desensitization.

To analyze, these findings are both significant as well as alarming because if people who have become desensitized to violence do not respond emotionally or even biologically, this may prevent these people from helping victims in the future. Even more alarming, these people may not be affected if they themselves have become the abuser since the response to the stimuli has been reduced significantly. It has been theorized by many scientists that desensitization of violence is more dangerous for children to develop rather than to experience for the first time as fully developed healthy adults [12]. The reason this theory is of importance is that a children's brain, specifically the frontal lobe controlling judgment and personality, is still growing and developing, soaking in its surroundings and new information like a sponge. In other words, when children learn not to respond to certain stimuli with the appropriate reaction, this will prevent them from doing so later in life, especially since neuroplasticity has been shown to decrease with age. Not only that, but as basic science classes have taught, the more you use certain area of the brain, the better that brain region responds and the stronger the neural connections. Yet, if children are learning to disengage the amygdala, the brain region controlling fear, and the prefrontal cortex, controlling emotional expression and cognitive skills, in situations where violence has been inflicted, then one can assume that they will not be able to learn to engage these regions as adults because the brain has already been developed and trained that way. Reversing violence desensitization 8

DISCUSSION

In general, by definition, those affected by desensitization to violence are those exposed to violence at repeated high levels of exposure. But, in order to be more specific, particularly in the focus of my research, I will examine the data pertaining to domestic violence exposure to children in the United

States. According to the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, each year, one out of fifteen children is exposed to domestic violence [13].

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the most common reason domestic violence incidents go unreported is that the incidents are considered to be a private or personal matter. Another disturbing reason is to protect the offender from consequences [14]. One can go into deeper analysis as the topic is increasingly complex and discuss the cognitive distortions domestic violence victims experience about the abusers. Though the finding about victims wanting to protect the abuser seems unusual and disturbing, victims often have become cognitively disillusioned by the manipulations caused by domestic violence [15]. I bring this up because, as mentioned earlier, children have underdeveloped frontal lobes as they are still growing. Relating and connecting significance to these findings, it is very common for child witnesses or victims of violence to want to protect the perpetrator as they are at a cognitive disadvantage to start with before any manipulations are even applied [16].

Also reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2019, there were approximately 1.2 million domestic violence victimizations in the United States. [17]. The Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody stated that researches reversing violence desensitization 9 have concluded and estimated that each year, a number between 3.3 million and 10 million children are witnesses to domestic violence. These numbers are concerning and unfortunately, there have not been data representing the amount of these children who have been desensitized to the violence. Although, one can imply that since the abuse was repeated, they already have achieved desensitization. Prolonged exposure to domestic violence leads to a decline in overall health [18]. Looking at the data of the amount children affected by domestic violence, we can infer that many children are suffering poor health due to exposure violence in the household.

Unfortunately, at the moment there are no known solutions to the problem of real-life violence desensitization. The literature itself states that there is a great need for research in interventions for witnesses of domestic violence [19]. There are currently no particular interventions that have been tested to reverse effects of desensitization to domestic violence or real-life violent crimes.

The studies mentioned above suggest that desensitization to violence is a concerning issue but is only newly researched. The results confirm that desensitization to violence causes lowered levels of emotional and physiological responses. In addition to effects in responses to violence, there has been evidence suggesting that desensitization leads to higher levels of aggression in overall behavior. Based on the general results of the literature, it is implied that reaching habituation to domestic violence has negative effects on the brain at a neural level, psychological effects at a cognitive level, and physiological effects that promote unhealthy detachments to the severity of violent reality and enable the formation of healthy responses to reversing violence desensitization 10 such incidents while also promoting undesirable behaviors of aggression. The current interventions include empowering families through clubs, child-parent therapies, support groups, and providing shelters and resources to victims. Though all of these are great areas to work on the social world and issue of domestic violence, none of these interventions examine desensitization.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, since this is a new topic in social work, psychology, neuroscience, and even criminology, there is not a lot of research on interventions specifically for neither violence desensitization nor studies documented to reverse the effects of habituation to violence. My research aims to examine reversal of domestic violence desensitization in children pre-adolescence, with hopes that the relevant literature expands on the topic in the near future as the issue is serious and needs to be addressed. Reversing violence desensitization 11.

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