

Bolstering the Impact of Homework in Trauma-Focused Therapies: Facilitating Conversations with Clients for More Meaningful Out-of-Session Therapy Practice

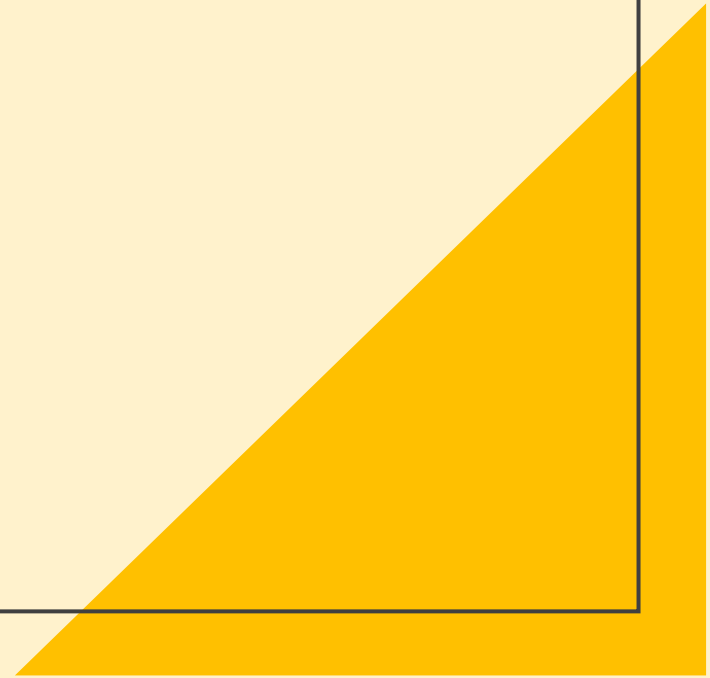
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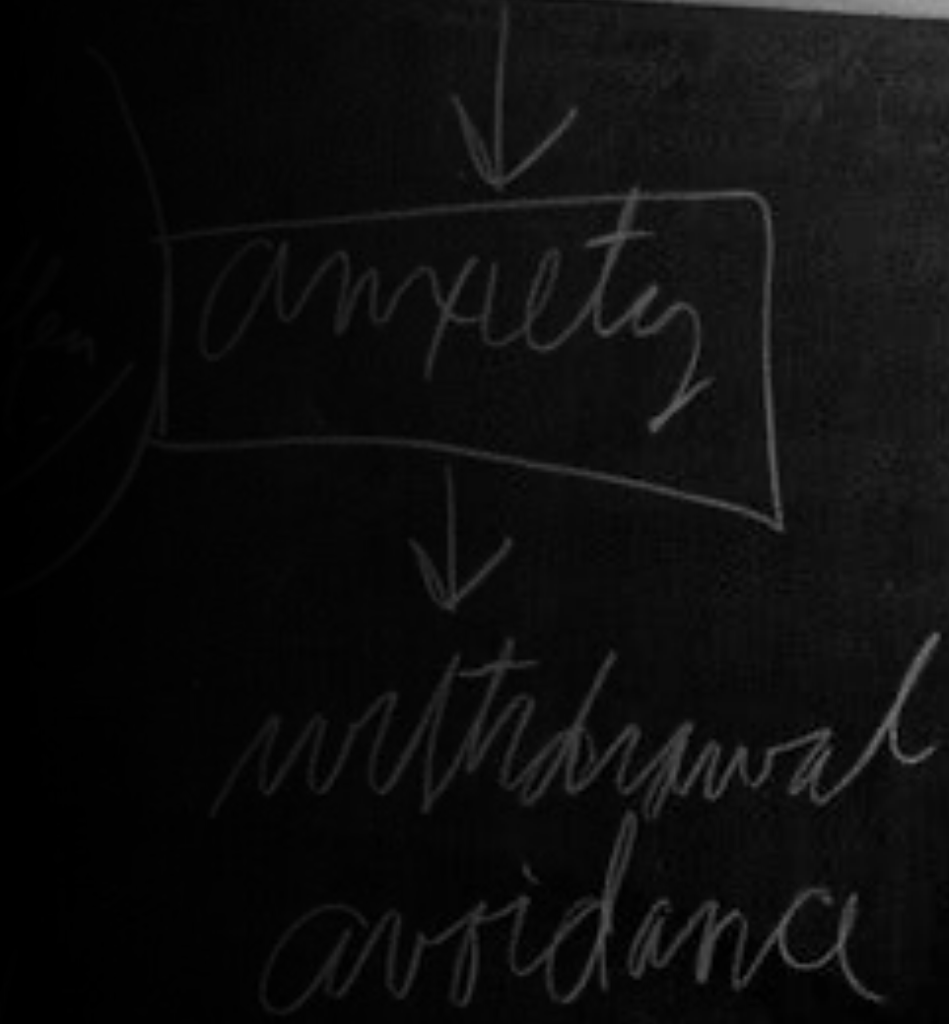
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“Homework is a significant vehicle from which data which disconfirm many negative thoughts and beliefs can be obtained”(Beck et al., 1979)

Integrating homework into therapy is a clinical skill

Beck's (1979) Guide to the Successful Integration of Homework in Cognitive Therapy

- Providing a rationale
- Individualizing assignments
- Reviewing assignments to reinforce clients' efforts and facilitate learning
- Working to make therapist redundant to help clients become their own therapists



Where are we now?

What therapy process variables are the strongest drivers of CBT treatment outcomes based on meta-analytic findings?

Therapeutic alliance

Homework



A dilemma for
trauma-focused
therapists?



What do the data suggest?

CPT Homework Studies

Stirman et al., 2018

Stirman et al., 2021

PE Homework Studies

Marks et al., 1998

Cooper et al., 2017

Homework impacts
treatment outcomes

How exactly does homework contribute to better outcomes?



Does the amount of time my client spends matter?

Do the clients' perceptions of the homework matter?

Does the amount of homework my client does matter?

Does the therapist's role matter?

Evaluating the Relative Contribution of Patient Effort and Therapist Skill in Integrating Homework Into Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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1. How do different aspects of the homework contribute to outcomes?

- Completion rate
- Number of homework attempts
- Homework helpfulness
- Minutes spent on assignments

2. How do therapists influence the effect of homework on outcomes?

Objective: Homework has historically been an integral component of cognitive behavioral interventions for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Previous studies differ in the measurement of therapy homework, resulting in inconsistent conclusions about its contributions to symptom reduction. Given the methodological burden associated with examining therapist skill within sessions, there has been no research evaluating the impact of both therapist and patient efforts on homework within and outside of the therapy session across protocols. **Method:** We first examined the relative contribution of four homework-related variables to treatment outcomes of survivors of interpersonal violence (12 sessions; 58 survivors) diagnosed with PTSD and treated with cognitive processing therapy (CPT) in two randomized, controlled clinical trials. We then assessed the moderating effect of therapist competency in the homework element of CPT on these associations by examining therapist skill in 544 therapy sessions scored by independent raters. **Results:** Perceived helpfulness of assignments emerged as the only significant predictor of PTSD symptom reduction ($\beta = 0.48$). Therapist homework competency moderated the relationship between time spent on homework and treatment outcome, such that more time spent on homework was associated with significantly poorer treatment response at low levels of therapist homework competency. **Conclusions:** Results suggest that patients' understanding of the direct contribution of homework to recovery is critical for increasing the effectiveness of the homework component of therapy. Therapist skill in incorporating homework effectively into the protocol is variable. It is essential that therapists ensure that patients' efforts (e.g., time dedicated to the task) are yielding clear results and perceived as fruitful.

Clinical Impact Statement

Homework is a core component of evidence-based therapies for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); yet, for some patients, the burden of homework may present a barrier to engaging fully in treatment. This study takes a nuanced approach to understanding the role of homework in PTSD recovery by investigating the contribution of varying aspects of homework, including both patient efforts and therapist skill, during cognitive processing therapy (CPT). Our findings provide clinically useful information for navigating the integration of homework into CPT as well as providing guidance for intervening in situations in which patients find homework completion challenging.

Keywords: cognitive processing therapy, PTSD, homework, therapist skill

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001459.supp>

Study Design

Participants

58 women survivors of interpersonal violence

Treatment

Weekly 2-12 sessions CPT

Therapists

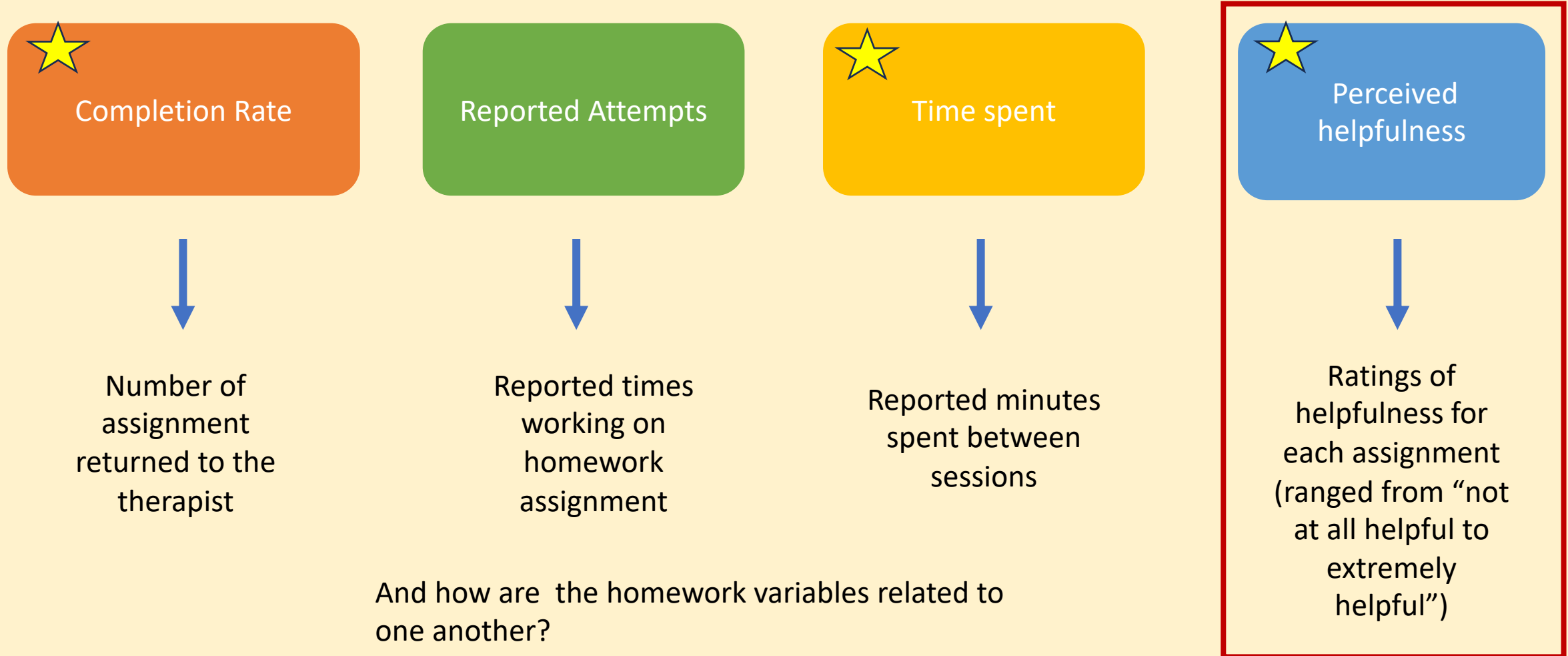
- 7 Master's level clinicians
- 1 Doctoral Level Clinician

Data Sources

- Clinician Rated
- Self-report
- Coded therapy sessions

Aim 1:

How do these homework aspects contribute to PTSD symptom reductions?



Aim 2: How do therapist influence the effects of homework?

How did therapist do on the following things?

- a) Reviewing and incorporating homework assignments into sessions
- b) Including a clear introduction and assignment of new homework
- c) Problem-solving around barriers to homework completion
- d) Attempts to increase compliance following noncompletion of home-work
- e) Reassignment of incomplete work

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Poor Barely Mediocre Satisfactory Good Very Good Excellent
 Adequate

Avg rating = 4.25

Aim 2: How do therapist influence the effects of homework?

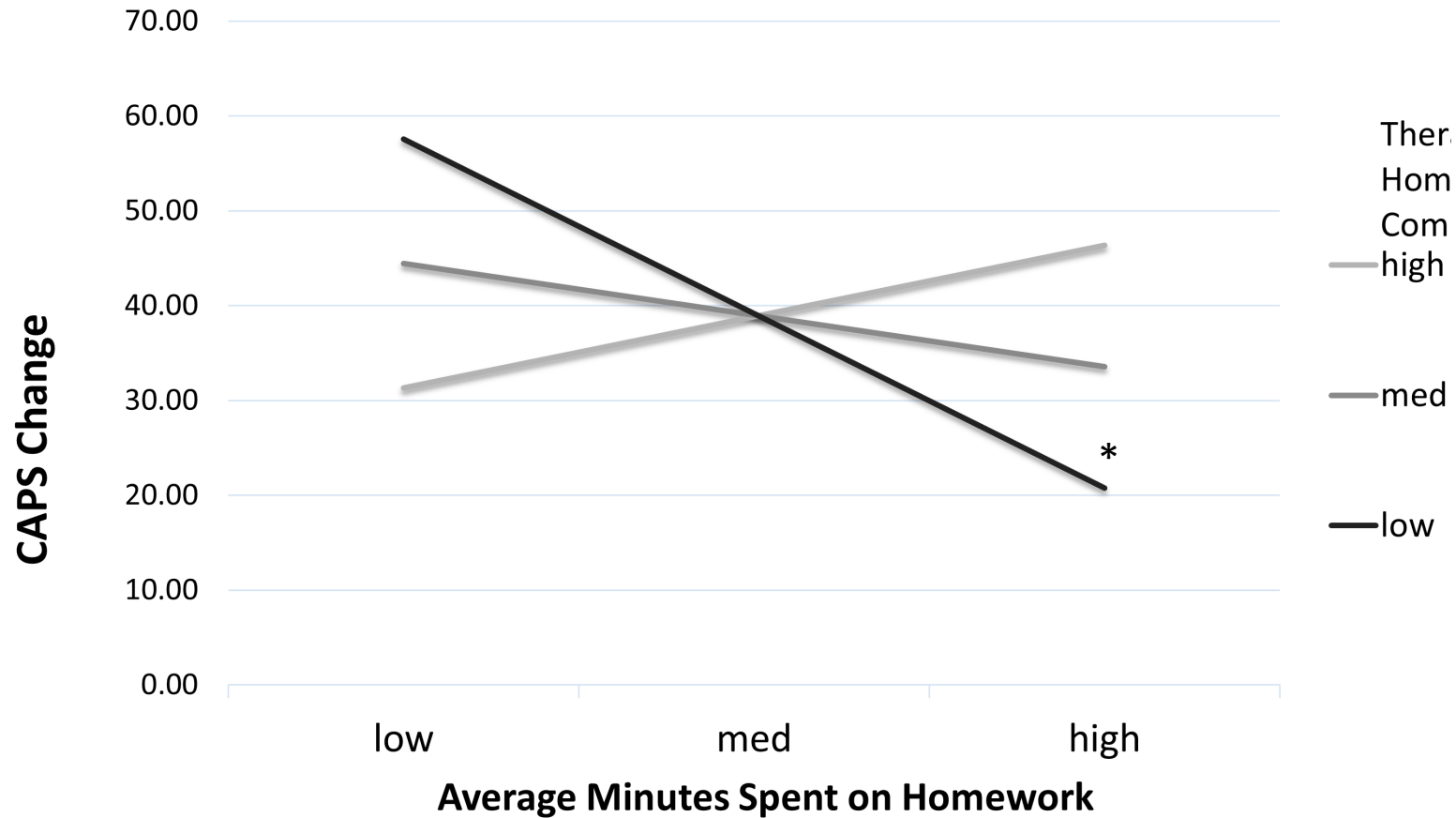
Homework
Completion Rate

Reported
Homework
Attempts



Time spent on
homework

Perceived
homework helpful
helpfulness



When therapist homework competency is low, participants who spent more time benefited less.

Take aways

- Adherence to homework is important
- Perceived homework helpfulness is a significant driving factor
- Ensuring homework is helpful should be a top priority
- Attending to client's time commitment and effort to homework important. Is the time they are committing helpful for them and returning gains?



What about Prolonged Exposure?

Homework helpfulness

Adherence to In vivo Exposures

Adherence to Imaginal Exposures

Does the dose of homework influences outcomes?



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Homework “Dose,” Type, and Helpfulness as Predictors of Clinical Outcomes in Prolonged Exposure for PTSD

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Homework is often viewed as central to prolonged exposure (PE) for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but its relationship with treatment outcome is not well understood. We evaluated homework *type*, *dose*, and patients’ perceptions of *helpfulness* as predictors of symptom change and posttreatment outcomes in PE. Patients with chronic PTSD received PE in a randomized clinical trial. Independent

evaluators assessed PTSD severity at pre- and posttreatment. Patients reported homework adherence and perceived helpfulness at the beginning of each session, separately for in vivo and imaginal exposure assignments. These variables were examined as predictors of change in PTSD symptoms, PTSD remission, and good end-state functioning (GESF; low PTSD, depression, and anxiety) at posttreatment. Higher imaginal homework adherence predicted greater symptom improvement between sessions and across treatment, as well as twice the odds of achieving remission and GESF. Patients who were at least moderately adherent to imaginal homework assignments (two or more times a week) reported more symptom gains than those who were least adherent but did not differ from those who were most adherent. In vivo adherence was not consistently associated with better outcome, perhaps due to heterogeneity in form and function of weekly assignments. Higher ratings of helpfulness of both types of homework predicted greater symptom improvement from pre- to posttreatment and between sessions. Overall, imaginal exposure homework may complement in-session exposures by enhancing key change processes, though perfect adherence is not necessary. Patients’ perceptions of helpfulness may reflect buy-in or perceived match between homework completion and functional impairment. Clinically, in addition to targeting

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PE homework Findings

Helpfulness predicts
outcomes for both HW
types

Adherence to in vivo
exposures was not
significant possibility
related to heterogeneity in
in vivo assignments

Adherence to imaginal
exposures significantly
predicted to improvement

Doing 'moderate' amounts
of imaginal exposure was
just as good as doing 'high'
amounts



STRONG STAR
TRAINING
INITIATIVE

PASSWORD #1:
strong



STRONG STAR
TRAINING
INITIATIVE

PASSWORD #2:

star

Supporting Client Homework Engagement



Providing a rationale



Individualizing assignments



Reviewing assignments to reinforce clients' efforts and facilitate learning



Working to make therapist redundant to help clients become their own therapists (self-efficacy).

Influencing Helpfulness

- What we say influences our clients
 - “I think you are really going to find this helpful because....”
 - “What benefit would you get from completing it?”
 - “What did you find helpful when completing your homework/assignment?”
 - “How did completing the assignment bring you closer to your goal?”
 - “You’re going to walk away with this great skill that will help you....”
 - “What would make this more helpful to you?”

What about too little?

- Perfect adherence isn't necessary
- Minimum necessary not known