

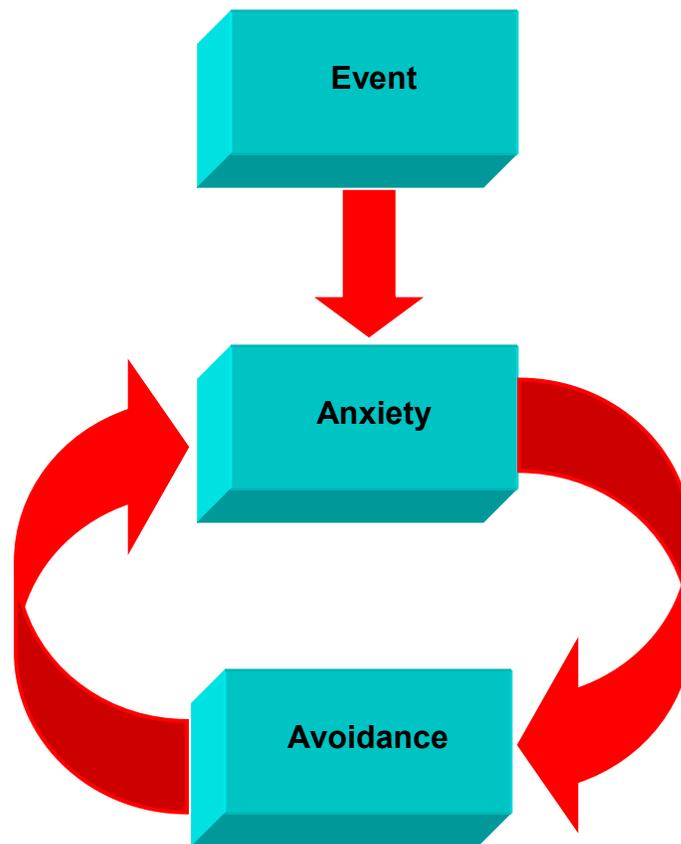


FACING YOUR FEARS: HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY PERFORM EXPOSURE THERAPY



HOW AVOIDANCE FUELS ANXIETY AND HOW EXPOSURE CAN TREAT IT

Exposure is the most important behavioural technique that you can use to help you overcome anxiety-provoking situations and your fears. Exposure is based on the assumption that anxiety is maintained by avoiding the feared situation as demonstrated in the figure below.



Thus, you learn that the only way to deal with the feared situation is to avoid it or run away when faced with it. In addition, since you do not put yourself in the feared situation, you never have the opportunity to test whether the feared consequence comes true – that is, you never have the opportunity to test whether your fear is real! In essence, the principle of exposure is to deliberately put yourself in contact with the situation(s) or cue(s) that cause you anxiety. As you remain in the situation, you learn that the feared or negative consequence does not occur and that you do not have to

avoid your fear in order to feel relief from the anxiety. Thus, your anxiety diminishes or habituates with time, and with repetition it eventually extinguishes or disappears.



For your information: There are two main types of exposure: 1) *in vivo* exposure; and 2) imaginal exposure. During *in vivo* exposure you come in direct contact with the anxiety-provoking situations in real-life. For example, if you have a fear of taking the elevator, you take the elevator. During imagined exposure patients face the anxiety-provoking situation in their imagination.

As a general rule, you should always try to engage in *in vivo* exposure because you come in direct contact with the feared situation. Imaginal exposure is only useful when *in vivo* is not feasible, since the anxiety cues are not directly accessible. Such as is the case for thoughts or memories. Imaginal exposure may also be useful if you are too anxious to attempt *in vivo* exposure. Once you have success using imaginal exposure, switch to *in vivo* exposure as soon as possible if it is feasible.

STEPS IN CONDUCTING EXPOSURE

- 1. Understand why exposure is important.** It is important that you understand why exposure is important and how avoidance fuels anxiety. If it is not clear, reread the first paragraph. A review of the Overcoming Anxiety toolkit may also be useful.
- 2. Creating your exposure hierarchy**

The principle of exposure is that of putting yourself in the situation(s) that cause you fear and anxiety. Since this could sound overwhelming, psychologists have developed a tool called an 'exposure hierarchy' to help you along. An exposure hierarchy is simply a list of your anxiety-provoking situations graded by anxiety level. To construct a hierarchy, list all the situations that cause you anxiety. Next, give each situation a 'subjective units of distress' (SUDs) rating from 0% (no anxiety) to 100% (the most anxiety ever). Slot them in the appropriate category using the Anxiety Provoking Situations Worksheet.



A useful example: The analogy of using a ladder to climb over a wall may be useful to explain the principle of an exposure hierarchy. Imagine that you were asked you to climb over a 10-foot wall. Would you be able to? Would you have confidence in your ability to do so? But if you were provided with a ladder, you could climb up one step at a time until you were able to climb over the wall. Now would this be useful? Would you have confidence in your ability?

Sometimes a situation may be too difficult to enter because it is too anxiety provoking. If this is the case, you can simply create an exposure hierarchy for that one situation. For example, if taking the elevator elicits 100% anxiety, you can create an exposure hierarchy for this single situation such as: standing in front of the elevator, then getting on the elevator and going up one floor with people, then two floors with others present, then go up one floor alone, then two floors alone, etc. As you can see, exposure is a versatile technique and can be applied to any feared situation.

Click on the Anxiety Provoking Situations Examples for an illustration of exposure hierarchies. The first example demonstrates an exposure hierarchy with different feared situations and the second example takes the fear of riding the metro and shows how to construct an exposure hierarchy for that situation.



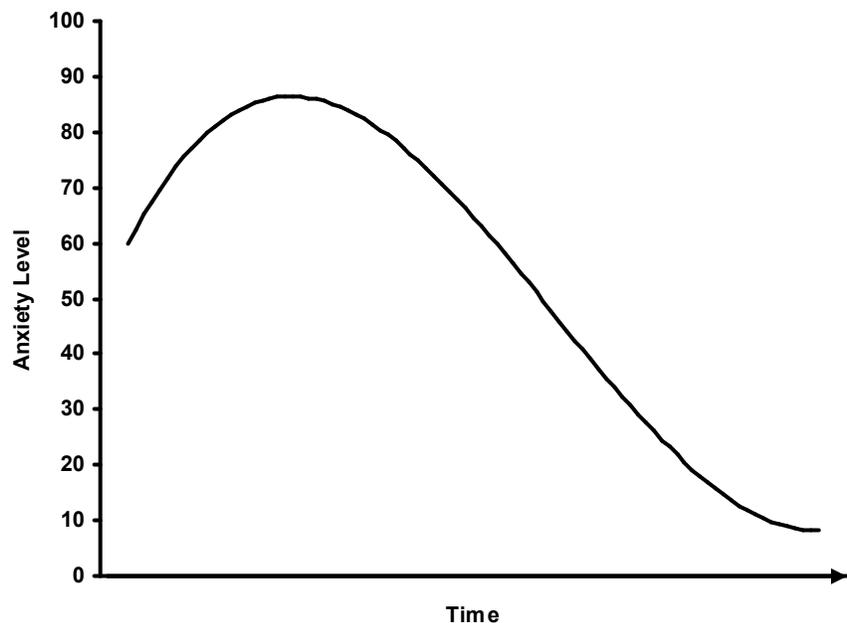
Key Points: The reasons for constructing an exposure hierarchy are the following:

1. For you to experience some early success and have confidence in the principle of exposure.
2. So you can practice the coping techniques provided in the associated toolkits.
3. So you learn how to successfully conduct an exposure exercise.

3. Conducting your first exposure exercise

During exposure, it is important that you face a situation that elicits an appropriate level of anxiety. As a general rule, pick a situation from your exposure hierarchy that causes 30% SUDs. Enter the situation and use the coping techniques from the following toolkits: 1) Diaphragmatic Breathing; 2) relaxation; 3) re-appraising your fears using the Change Your Negative Thinking toolkit. Throughout the

exercise, monitor your level of anxiety. What happens to your anxiety? Does it increase,



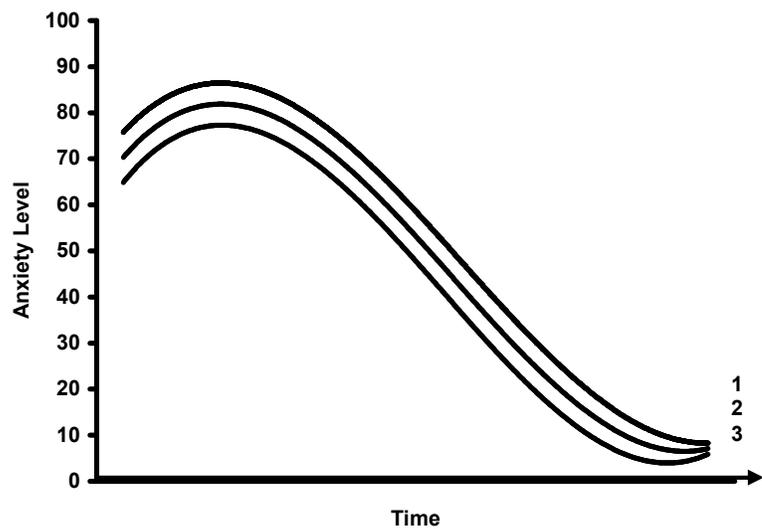
stay the same, or decrease? For your information, the usual pattern is that your anxiety may initially increase and reach a plateau, and then decrease to a tolerable level as shown in the figure just above. It is important that you stay in the situation until your anxiety has decreased to a level that is less than 30%. Only after this can you end the exposure exercise.



Hint: What should I do if my anxiety becomes intolerable? This is an excellent question! If you find that your anxiety reaches more than 70% on your SUDs, focus on the coping techniques and **do not** leave the situation immediately. If you do, you will learn to avoid the situation and the relief you feel will reinforce the avoidance and make it harder for you to be in such situations. Remember that this is what you have been doing in the past and is what has caused the problem! In addition, you will not have the experience of coping with your anxiety and learning that you can do things to control it. If after a few minutes your anxiety is still high, you can give yourself permission to distance yourself from the situation a bit. For example, if you fear taking the metro and your anxiety reaches 70% while waiting on the platform, you may move to the stairs leading to the platform and use the coping techniques. Once your anxiety has decreased to 30-50%, you can either return to the platform or withdraw from the exercise totally and repeat it another day. Regardless of the option you choose, you have just **proved to yourself that you can calm yourself and manage your anxiety!** In addition, if you decide to leave the situation with your anxiety higher than you would like, realize that although the feeling is uncomfortable, **nothing dangerous happened!**

4. Repeat the Exposure Exercise.

Do not expect your anxiety to decrease to less than 30% SUDs after one exercise or for you to no longer experience any anxiety in the situation. In order for these two goals to happen, make sure to repeat the exposure exercise as frequently as possible. Your SUDs will decrease as you expose yourself repeatedly as shown in the figure to the right (i.e. from 1, to 2 to 3). In addition, try to apply modifications to the exercise



in order that your success and coping strategies generalizes to similar situations. For example, if you have a fear of driving to work and have been successful taking one particular route, try a different way so that you have the experience of managing your anxiety in another similar situation. Be as creative as you can! Knock yourself out!



Key Points: As a review, here are the three key principles of any exposure exercise:

1. The situation must evoke a minimal level of anxiety (at least 30% on your SUDs).
2. You must stay in the situation until you habituate to the anxiety and it decreases.
3. You must repeat the exposure exercise so that your anxiety decreases with each successive repetition.



Reasons Why Exposure Will Not Work: If you find that exposure is not working, here are a few reasons why and what you can do about it:

1. Are you distracting yourself while in the feared situation? If you are, you are using avoidance. Why is this strategy not useful? If you need a hint, reread the first paragraph of this toolkit. What should you do instead?
2. The situation has low SUDs. Pick a situation that is higher in SUDs.
3. Do you quickly leave the situation as soon as your anxiety increases? If so, why is this strategy not useful? If you need a hint, reread the first paragraph of this toolkit or the section “What should I do if my anxiety becomes intolerable?”
4. You are not engaging in exposure exercises frequently enough. How can you increase the frequency?