



OVERCOMING ANXIETY – 8 FACING OUR TRIGGERS – 2

LEARNING OUR LESSONS

Our progress depends on what we pay attention to when completing exposure exercises. A person who visits a crowded mall, runs outside and focuses on the unpleasantness of the panic attack they have just experienced is going to have very hard time coming back to the mall. They might force themselves to come back and then run again and eventually will end up believing that exposure does not work. It is like trying to acclimate to swimming in a lake on a summer afternoon but jumping in and out of water hoping that the next jump will make us not feel the cold. A person who sets a goal of spending 30 minutes in the mall and controlling their behaviour while they are there by purposefully walking slowly, sitting down and quietly surveying what is happening around them will notice a number of things:

1. Being in a mall makes them feel uncomfortable.
2. Even though they feel uncomfortable there are no signs of real danger, so the discomfort is likely due to false body alarms.
3. Even though they are uncomfortable, they can manage their behaviour and stay put. This makes them trust their own ability to handle stress. This ability is in high demand in our lives.
4. As time progresses, the level of discomfort goes down (provided the person in question is not actively waiting to escape and looking on their watch). This experience makes them trust the process of habituation. It is like walking into a cool lake on summer afternoon and staying there until water feels comfortable. And then doing it again next day when the water feels cold because you have learnt that eventually the water will feel comfortable.
5. As they leave the mall slowly, the body does not generate a feedback loop that reinforces the need to run and makes people attribute safety to escape.

HOW TO INCREASE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPOSURE

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| 1. | Repetition until point of boredom. | Now and then there will be a set-back as anticipatory anxiety might kick in before the exercise even takes place. However, with multiple repetitions, the severity of reaction is bound to come down on average. Boredom and anxiety do not coexist. |
| 2. | Remembering that severe anxiety does not imply failure. | The goal is to build stress tolerance. If you prove to yourself that you are able to do what needs to be done despite painful sensations, painful sensations are easier to deal with. <i>This is how hard feels like and you have it in you to do hard stuff.</i> |
| 3. | Selecting meaningful goals as a top point of the exposure hierarchy. | Knowing that you put yourself through a lot of unpleasant exercises in order to be able to do something that you always wanted to do increases motivation. |
| 4. | Vary contexts and situations. | If you always go to the same café, you might feel comfortable there but experience severe anxiety if you are invited to a different place. Once you achieve reduction in one setting, experiment with many other similar settings. |
| 5 | Set your tasks as behavioural experiments. | Treating these challenges as experiments helps you keep an open mind. If you keep track of your predictions and outcomes |

using the Behavioural Experiment worksheet, you are likely to make faster progress.

6. **UNDERSTAND YOUR TRIGGERS AND TARGET THE RIGHT TRIGGER**

Yours goal might be to be able to drive, fly or eat in public, yet the exposure hierarchy might not consist of increased durations of driving, flying or eating in a restaurant. You need to ask yourself details about what is triggering in these situations. For instance the fear of driving might be related to fear of being stuck in traffic so some of your exposures will include going through a drive through or in a slow lane on a busy day as driving for one hour in an empty country road will do nothing to alleviate your fear. Most people who are afraid of flying have fear of crowded closed spaces and of having a panic attack in public – they have to build their exposure exercises around these fears. Someone who is afraid of eating in a restaurant might have fear of embarrassment or choking on their food – you have to construct your fear hierarchy accordingly.

WHAT IMPEDES EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPOSURE EXERCISES:

1. Going too fast or starting at a very high level on your exposure hierarchy The anxiety reaction might be too strong to tolerate and a person is likely to abandon the exercise at that point. Leaving an exercise at peak anxiety prevents habituation and reinforces a belief that situation is intolerable. You are not allowing yourself to experience the reduction in physiological arousal.
2. Abandoning exposure exercise before habituation takes place. It is like jumping in an out of the lake and will reinforce the belief that the exercise is intolerable. You are also at risk of reinforcing your habit to escape difficult situations.
3. Not wanting to feel anxiety and starting at a level below 50. It is impossible to develop stress tolerance when stress isn't there. The person will be progressing very slowly or not at all and end up discouraged. Keep in mind that exposure exercises build tolerance by facing triggers that are meant to create anxious reactions.
4. Doing 2-3 attempts and concluding that it does not work. Exposure requires sustained repetition.
5. Making exposure exercises not long enough. Learning requires time.
6. Starting too low on the hierarchy You are practicing to tolerate something that you are already able to tolerate. Exposure allows us to tolerate triggers and consequently reduce our anxious reactions in the long run. It is not meant to make you feel good when you go through your exercises (albeit feeling good might come from a sense of accomplishment).

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS:

1: GOAL:		Predicted level of distress (0-100)	
<p>2: Imagine a scenario that would demonstrate that you have reached your goal. Where would you be? Who will be with you? What will you be doing? Flesh a specific imaginary situation as much as possible.</p>			
3:LIST WHAT YOU PRESENTLY FIND TRIGGERING ABOUT THIS SCENARIO			
Your Triggers:			Predicted level of distress (0-100)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
4:BUILD YOUR HIERARCHY			
	TASK	Predicted Level of Distress (0-100)	Order of implementation
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10.			

EXPOSURE LADDER - EXAMPLES

Example 1

GOAL: <i>Tolerate panic attack in a public place and do what needs to be done despite panic.</i> The person in this example experiences panic when alone and is very worried that shortness of breath means that something very wrong is happening to them. This person is also worried that if panic happens in public, she will weird and become a centre of negative attention.	Predicted level of distress (0-100)
	100

TAKS / STEP	Predicted Level of Distress (0-100)	Order of implementation
1 <i>Hyperventilate on purpose for 2 minutes</i>	70	2
2 <i>Do cardio exercise for 15 minutes</i>	80	3
3 <i>Breathe through a straw for two minutes</i>	70	2
4 <i>Go for 15 minute walk, alone but carry a cell phone</i>	60	1
5 <i>Go for a walk for 15 minutes alone and without a cell phone</i>	80	3
6 <i>Go to a mall with a good friend who knows about the problem but leave the friend for 10 minutes; carry the cell phone</i>	80	3
7 <i>Go to a mall with a good friend who knows about the problem but leave the friend for 30 minutes; carry the cell phone.</i>	90	4
8 <i>Go to a mall alone for 15 minutes; walk slowly, carry a cell phone</i>	80	3
9 <i>Go to a mall alone for one hour, carry a cell phone</i>	90	4
10 <i>Go to a mall with a friend and fake a panic attack to see how people react (e.g, start hyperventilating)</i>	100	5

Example 2

GOAL: <i>Drive to work.</i> The person in this example has been in a car accident on the way to work, feels panicked when in a vehicle and experiences flashbacks.	Predicted level of distress (0-10)
	10

TASK / STEP	Predicted Level of Distress (0-100)	Order of implementation
1 <i>Go for a ride with a friend for one hour; the friend is driving.</i>	60	2
2 <i>Go for short drive with a friend in calm traffic, drive yourself for half an hour.</i>	80	3
3 <i>Use a driver program on a computer game for one hour; high level traffic</i>	50	1
4 <i>Write down the memory of the accident and read it to yourself in a matter of fact way for 15 minutes.</i>	90	4
5 <i>Drive on side streets for 30 minutes, alone, low traffic.</i>	90	4
6 <i>Drive in mid-range traffic for 30 minutes, alone.</i>	90	4
7 <i>Drive in mid-range traffic for 60 minutes, alone.</i>	90	4
8 <i>Practice a drive to work and back; avoid the route next to where the accident happened.</i>	100	5
9 <i>Practice a drive to work and back using your usual route.</i>	100	5

EXPOSURE LADDER

GOAL: .	Predicted level of distress (0-10)

	TASK / STEP	Predicted Level of Distress (0- 100)	Order of implementation
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Break the goal into smaller steps by changing:

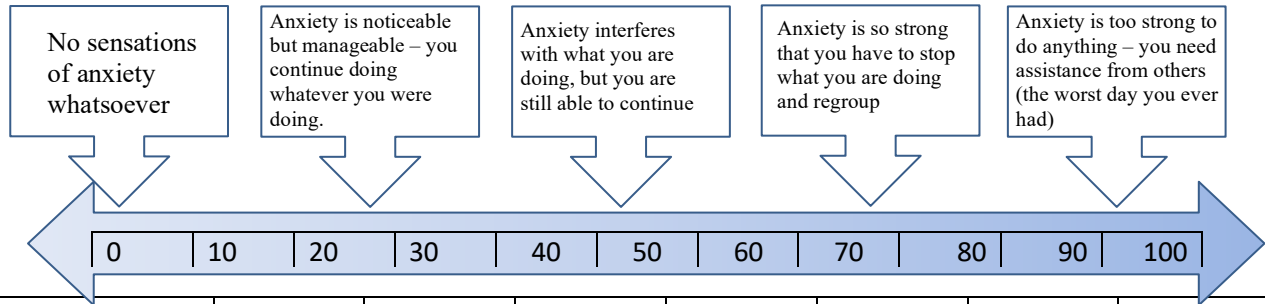
- Who is there
- What you do
- When you do it
- Where you do it
- How long you do it for

EXPOSURE TRACKING SHEETS - EXAMPLE

Make sure you complete these for each of your goals so that you can monitor your progress and ensure that you are following through with the exercises.

EXPOSURE TRACKING SHEET – EXAMPLE					
Date	Goal that you are working on	Task/step that you are working on	Predicted level of distress (0-10)	Actual level of distress (0-10)	Notes
July 11, 2015	Drive to work	Used computer simulation for one hour	50	50	Felt quite realistic but manageable; need to try again
July 12, 2015	Drive to work	Used computer simulation	50	40	Realistic but manageable; I need to move to a more difficult goal now
July 15, 2015	Drive to work	Went for a drive with a friend; friend was driving	60	40	Not as bad as I anticipated but needed to use some coping strategies.
July 10, 2015	Tolerate panic	Hyperventilated for one minute	70	70	Hated it but it is manageable; nothing bad happened other than the sensations of panic.
July 10, 2015	Tolerate panic	Go out for 15 minutes; carry cell phone	70	90	Could not bring myself to do it, will try again and just go to the mailbox and back
July 11, 2015	Tolerate panic	Went out of to mailbox and back	90	75	Hard but manageable; nothing bad happened other than the sensations of panic.

KEEPING TRACK AND KEEPING HONEST



DATE:								
Rate the intensity of your overall anxiety throughout the day using the scale above and mark it on the graph.	100							
	90							
	80							
	70							
	60							
	50							
	40							
	30							
	20							
	10							
	0							
What challenges / stresses were you faced with today?								
What skill have you practiced?	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding
What were you able to accomplish during the day?								
<i>What exposure exercises or challenges did you set for yourself?</i>								
How much time was spent on worrying?								
How much time was spent on doing something proactive (problem solving, taking action steps)?								