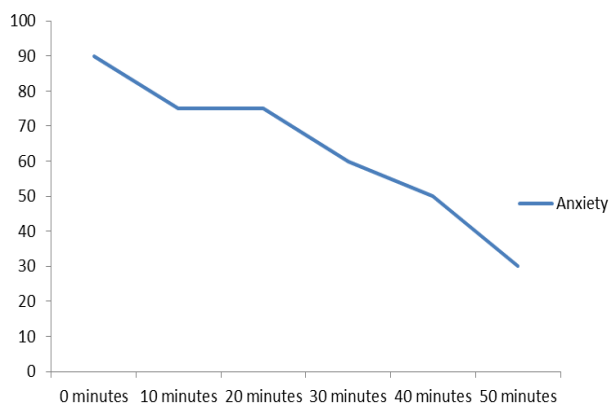


Self-Help Information



Leaflet 3: Face Your Fears

Graded Exposure Therapy



Leaflet 3: Facing Your Fears (Exposure therapy)

People will often try to avoid situations or objects as a way of managing their fear. Although this avoidance might help reduce feelings of fear and anxiety in the short term, over the long term it can make these feelings become even worse.

Exposure is a technique that helps you face your fear slowly and gradually. It works by reintroducing you to your feared situation, object or memory in a planned way, very gradually and at your own pace. Exposure Therapy is not about immediately entering situations or environments which are extreme or the worst case imaginable. It is a highly effective treatment for many types of anxiety such as Specific phobias, agoraphobia, social phobia, obsessive compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

How does exposure therapy work?

Exposure therapy works through a process known as habituation. This is when anxiety naturally and gradually reduces as you remain in the presence of a feared object or situation.

When somebody initially encounters something they fear, their anxiety rises quickly to an intense level. Quite often, the person will escape from the feared situation or object to quickly reduce the anxiety they are feeling. The trouble with this is that the next time they encounter the same thing, they will feel as anxious as they did before. Because they flee as soon as anxiety rises, they never learn that habituation occurs. In exposure, habituation means that each exposure session should provoke less anxiety than the one previously.

There are four key factors to facing fears:

Gradual

Overcoming fear is best achieved by gradually confronting things that you fear i.e. moving from less to more fearful objects or situations, for example by using photographs in the early stages of treatment and moving onto real objects later, rather than extending the length of time your exposure activities last. By describing the stages in this way, we create a list of situations which is graded from bottom to top by how anxious you might expect to feel. This is called a hierarchy.

Prolonged

Exposure must be prolonged if it is to be effective. You must remain in the presence of the feared object or situation long enough for your anxiety levels to reduce naturally. Typically your exposure sessions should last for between one to two hours or until anxiety has reduced by at least 50%.

Repeated

Each step on your hierarchy list should be repeated until the level of anxiety it initially causes has significantly reduced, usually to around 40%. Repeating exposure tasks also strengthens your new learning. You should be guided by the demands you have on you in your day to day life. However, four or five prolonged repetitions weekly are usually manageable.

Without distraction

You must feel some fear at first in order to experience and thus learn that fear reduces naturally in the presence of the feared object or situation. Often people develop strategies and habits that reduce the level of anxiety they feel. For example, someone may sit near an exit so that they can leave quickly if they start to feel anxious. Another person may listen to music when they are in a crowded area to distract them from their anxiety. These are what we call safety behaviours. When carrying out exposure, using safety behaviours is unhelpful because they cause anxiety to reduce “unnaturally”. They distract and prevent you from experiencing habituation and learning that anxiety will gradually reduce on its own.

4 Steps to face your fears

Download extra copies of this worksheet from: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Step 1: List and rank fearful objects

Make a list of fearful objects or situations. Rank these in a hierarchy from the least anxiety provoking to the most anxiety provoking.

Step 2: Plan and start exposure

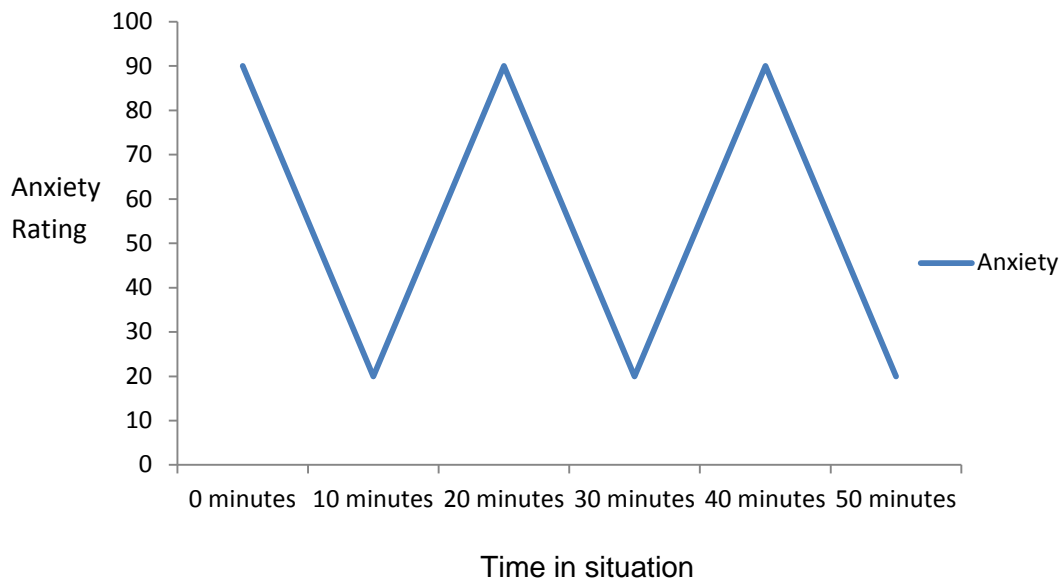
Use an exposure recording diary to plan your exposure. Start exposure with activities from the lower part of the list and repeat these until you get less anxiety and you feel more able to manage it. Rate your anxiety levels three times for each activity: before, during, and at the end, to help you monitor the change in your anxiety levels as you stay with the situation.

Step 3: Continue exposure up your list

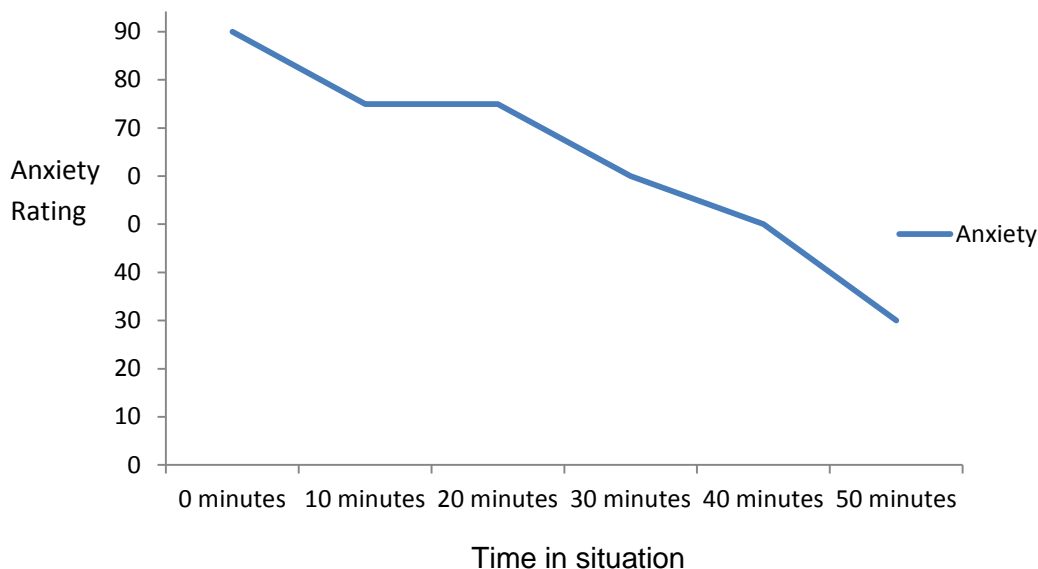
Use this list to plan further exposure by working your way up the hierarchy to objects or situations that are more feared. Always remember to remain in the presence of your feared situation or object until you experience a reduction in anxiety.

Step 4: Review your progress

Regularly look back at your progress and think about how you have got on. If you have any difficulties, think about whether you could plan things differently for the next day e.g. maybe moving up your list in smaller steps. Above all, remember to give yourself praise for your efforts – every step is helping you!



When we enter a situation we normally avoid, our anxiety levels are very high. This can feel overwhelming and make us want to escape or run away from the situation. If we escape, our anxiety level drops quite quickly as we no longer feel 'under threat'. However, if we later enter the same situation, our anxiety levels go back up to a high level as we have not learned that the situation is not dangerous/threatening to us. The sharp rises and falls in our anxiety continues to happen each time we are faced by the situation then avoid it. Although avoidance calms us down in the short run, continuing to escape from a situation only keeps us afraid in the long term.



However, if we remained in the presence of a situation that usually makes us anxious, our anxiety would naturally start to reduce. This is because our body cannot maintain high levels of anxiety for prolonged periods of time. The longer we stay in the situation, the longer our body has to learn that the situation is not dangerous and our anxiety continues to reduce. This is what we call habituation. If we repeatedly face the situation in future, we start to overcome the fear and our body feels less anxiety than when we first faced the situation.

Exposure worksheet 1

Exposure Hierarchy: put the activities /objects you are avoiding in order.

The most difficult

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Medium difficulty

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Easier

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Exposure exercise rating sheet

Plan the exposure exercises you will carry out in advance. Fill out the first two columns to indicate when and what you will do. During the exercise rate your anxiety levels using the scale at the bottom of this page. Afterwards record how long the exposure lasted.

Date and time	Exercise	Anxiety Rating			Duration	Comments
		Before	During	After		

0

25

50

75

100%

No Anxiety

Mild Anxiety

Moderate Anxiety

Severe Anxiety

Panic

These information leaflets have been adapted from 'Reach Out', National IAPT Programme Student Materials to Support the Delivery of Training for Practitioners Delivering Low Intensity Interventions. Rethink, 2008 © David Richards and Mark Whyte, 2008