

EXPOSURE TO DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

The more fears I look at in the face, the more they leave without a trace.

Over time, people with anxiety can develop agoraphobia and begin limiting daily activities to avoid experiencing panic when they are not in a “safe” place. People who appear to have mastered anxiety attacks, only to have them return later, never fully recovered in the first place. When panic decreases, do not become complacent! Use the following Exposure Chart to see if you are avoiding difficult situations. Then, choose a circumstance that causes you minimal distress. Practice exposing yourself to it with one of the methods below until you are comfortable. Let your symptoms know you intend to wait for them to pass.

- Refocus on a spot, safe-place image, details around you, your breathing, or a pleasant activity, or tap acupressure points if symptoms of panic start during a practice period.
- Flood by focusing on sensations of anxiety and talking yourself through them—“Oh good, this is just what I wanted to happen. The more times I float through symptoms of panic (without adding a second fear), the more quickly I will become desensitized to them.”
- Retreat/repeat by walking or driving away from a place of safety. At the first sign of tension, retreat. Calmly turn around and go toward safety. When you start to feel comfortable, repeat. Walk or drive away again. Continue this procedure throughout the practice session. Do not walk or drive in a random fashion. Plan your route in advance and work on it regularly until you are comfortable.¹

POINTERS FOR EXPOSURE

- Intentionally expose yourself for a practice period of 10–45 minutes without other obligations or distractions. Do not wait until you have to deal with a difficult situation.
- Practice for the designated time period even if panic passes quickly. Often, people have one or two waves of panic and then feel surprisingly comfortable.
- Practice even when you are stressed. Set your goals lower but practice regularly. The sense of accomplishment from practicing for 10 minutes may help you feel better.
- Take a moment to relax before starting. Doing this even when you are not tense will review calming techniques that you can use with any anxiety that does come.
- In public places, be sure to look at your surroundings and other people. When you avoid looking at people, you may imagine that they are staring at you.
- You may become bored and “get in your head” as situations become more comfortable. If you notice you are thinking too much, switch back to noticing your surroundings.
- Do not rush if symptoms of anxiety start! This only pumps adrenaline into your system.
- Progress will not always be even. Do not get discouraged if you have plateaus. Practicing the same activity over and over will build a platform for later growth.
- You may regress after making steady progress. This is to be expected. Success can be frightening. Review a previous accomplishment until it becomes comfortable again to gain confidence that setbacks can be overcome with practice.
- Identify new challenges that involve greater levels of distress after mastering one situation. This gives you opportunities to continue practicing until you are confident in your ability to “float through” symptoms of panic in any situation.

¹ The retreat/repeat method of exposure is further described in *Simple, Effective Treatment of Agoraphobia* by Claire Weekes (Bantam, 1979).

EXPOSURE CHART

Directions: Begin to eradicate panic attacks from your life by identifying situations that you avoid. Rate the degree to which you avoid each item (0 = not at all, 10 = completely). Add any other situations not listed. Systematically expose yourself to situations with a rating of 5 points or less until they are no longer a problem. Then continue to decrease anxiety in other difficult situations through exposure. Columns are provided so you can rerate yourself over time.²

Situations I Avoid

Degree Avoided: 0–10 Points

Home

Date:

- Taking showers or baths without anyone nearby
- Remaining at home alone
- Being in my yard by myself
- Walking away from my home __ blocks
- Other:

Travel

- Driving in and out of my driveway
- Driving in my neighborhood
- Driving where there are traffic lights
- Driving in traffic
- Driving on interstate highways
- Traveling over bridges or through tunnels
- Traveling on buses
- Traveling on trains, subways, or trams
- Traveling on planes
- Other:

Public places

- Supermarkets
- Restaurants
- Parties, social gatherings
- Theaters
- Churches
- Malls
- Amusement parks
- Football games/stadiums
- Other:

Confinement

- Lines in stores
- Elevators
- Prolonged conversations
- Barber's/hairdresser's chair
- Dentist's chair
- Other:

² Some of the items for this exposure chart were taken from *Don't Panic* by R. Reid Wilson (Harper & Row, 1986) p.30.