

## Exposure Therapy

Two types:

### Flooding

Involves rapid & intense exposure to most feared stimulus or level

### Graduated Exposure (our focus here)

Exposure involves a gradual progression of the client into more frequent and more intense or feared situations to increase tolerance of all associated discomfort, in a step-by-step manner. Frequent practice at home is essential.

For exposure exercises to be effective over time, they must last long enough for the person to experience an anxiety response. The client should feel anxious, but not more than is tolerable. This is a necessary component of this treatment approach for success to be achieved. The client then remains in the stimulus situation for as long as s/he can. If the situation involves a brief activity or stimulus encounter, repeat it more often. The client's tolerance for the discomfort of their anxiety symptoms will increase over time and repeated exposure exercises, and negative symptoms will begin to decline in intensity, frequency and duration.

**Change will take time**, and so all must be patient. It will not occur overnight or on just a few sessions or a couple of practice episodes. All anxiety may not disappear completely, but it will become more tolerable and interfere less with the client's daily life and enjoyment.

We **do not overcome anxiety by fighting back against it**. Get into a boxing match with your anxiety symptoms and you will likely lose. That strategy is not wise. Instead we will **treat it like a bully**. The more emotional reaction and distress the bully can create, the more fun he has, and longer he persists with his pestering activity, because he likes to see the fireworks of your emotionally charged protests! But, if you learn to give him increasingly less attention, and only minimally notice he's there, and better ignore or dismiss as insignificant his bothersome words or actions, he will eventually go elsewhere for his entertainment because you're no fun.

Instead, do your best to **remain in the anxiety provoking situation for as long as you can**, as often as you can, until your discomfort begins to decline and your anxiety symptoms begin to diminish. We'll record your experiences using a practice log to keep track of how your tolerance is improving and discomfort is declining during exposure exercises.

We'll also employ a number of strategies to **monitor and modify your cognitions** (anxious thoughts, negative predictions), and **relax your body and slow your breathing** during exposures. You'll learn how to breathe from your diaphragm (belly), and learn gradual muscular relaxation. These skills are **NOT** intended to combat or keep you from having symptoms, but to improve your control and tolerance of them.

An important part of this approach will also be to identify and **reduce all forms of avoidant behavior and "safety seeking"** or reassurance behaviors that, if left undetected and uninterrupted, will diminish or sabotage your progress.

Homework or practice sessions on your own will be essential to progress. Your engagement in practice exercises outside therapy maybe more important than what you do in sessions with your therapist!