

Guidelines for Conducting Exposure

- 1. Exposure practices should be planned, structured, and predictable.** Decide in advance what you will do in the situation and how long you will stay. Plan in advance when you will complete your practice and put it in your schedule. Have a back-up plan in case the original does not work out.
- 2. Exposure practices should be repeated frequently and spaced close together.** The more closely paced the practices, the more fear reduction that you are likely to experience. It is a good idea to practice being in the same situation repeatedly until it becomes easier.
- 3. Exposure pace can be gradual.** Do not assume that you must do the most difficult thing you can imagine right away, but be sure to choose practices that are challenging. The more difficult the items that you practice, the quicker you will learn to be more comfortable. Try to choose practices that are challenging but not so difficult that you will not complete them.
- 4. Expect to feel uncomfortable.** It is perfectly normal to feel awful during initial exposure practices. Also, these practices may leave you feeling tired and anxious afterwards. With repeated practices, these feelings will decrease. Success should not be judged by how you felt in the situation. Rather, success should be judged by whether you were able to stay in the situation despite feeling awful or not.
- 5. Try not to fight your fear.** Fighting the anxiety will have the effect of increasing your anxious feelings. Instead, just let it happen. The worst thing that is likely to happen is that you will feel temporarily uncomfortable.
- 6. Do not use subtle avoidance strategies during exposure.** Complete the practices without the use of distraction, medications, alcohol, leaving early, avoiding eye contact, and other such strategies.
- 7. Use exposure practices to test negative predictions about the consequences of facing your fear.** Before beginning an exposure, ask yourself what you are afraid might happen during the practice. Then conduct the exposure practice to test the accuracy of your fearful prediction. Afterwards, think about the evidence you gained from your experience and how it compares to your original fearful prediction.
- 8. Rate your fear on a scale from 0 to 100.** During exposure practices it can be helpful to pay attention to how you are feeling and to notice the variables that make your anxiety go up and down during the practice.
- 9. Exposure practices should last long enough for a significant reduction in anxiety.** Continue each exposure practice until your anxiety goes down, no matter how much time it takes. A good rule of thumb is to continue an exposure practice until your anxiety rating on the 0-100 scale decreases by at least half (e.g., below 40 if it peaked at 80).
- 10. Practices should take place in different settings to generalize learning.** Conducting exposure practices in multiple settings will help bring about a more broad decrease in your anxiety. It is often helpful to conduct exposures with your therapist, at home, and in other settings. It can also be helpful to conduct some exposures by yourself because sometimes the presence of other people can make us feel artificially safe.