What is Exposure Therapy?

It's natural to avoid what we fear, but this avoidance can quickly become all-consuming. Relationships, goals, and quality of life suffer. **Exposure therapy** is an evidence-based approach to confronting fears in a safe, systematic way. Guided by a therapist, a person faces their fears in manageable steps, leading to meaningful and even dramatic anxiety reduction.

Common Fears Treated with Exposure Therapy

- ✔ contamination worries & OCD concerns
- ✔ social anxiety
- ✔ phobias (heights, spiders, dogs, etc.)
- ✔ upsetting memories & PTSD
- ✔ panic attacks
- ✔ any fear that involves avoidance

How Exposure Therapy Works

1. The therapist and client create an exposure or fear hierarchy. This is a 0 to 100 rating of avoided situations, from least (0) to most distressing (100).
2. Starting with the lowest-rated fear, the client confronts the avoided scenarios using specific instructions from the therapist.
3. With practice, the client's fears diminish through a process known as habituation, leading to more time and energy to enjoy life and accomplish goals!

Types of Exposure Therapy

Imaginal	In Vivo ("In Life")	Combination
Vividly imagine the fears in the safety of a therapy session or at home using a script or audio recording.	Confront fears in real life in a structured way that is guided by the therapist.	Many therapists use a combination of these techniques depending on the fears and needs to be addressed.

Other Information

- Exposure therapy should be done under the guidance of an experienced professional.
- Sometimes exposure therapy is combined with medication, such as an antidepressant.
- 86% of OCD sufferers who completed exposure therapy improved, according to one study.
- The benefits of exposure therapy for phobias can last for years after treatment.

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Exposure Therapy in Action: Three Examples

Maria	Maria's Fear Hierarchy	
Maria is terrified of spiders and goes out of her way to avoid them. Guided by her therapist, Maria views a photo of a spider and watches a spider documentary. Maria later agrees to touch a spider that her therapist brings into the session, eventually even allowing the spider to walk over her bare arms. A week later, Maria takes her kids to a spider exhibition at the zoo. "I even enjoyed it!" Maria proudly tells her therapist in her final session.	100	Let a large spider walk on arms
	90	Sit next to a spider in a terrarium
	85	Hike a trail where spiders are common
	80	Stand 5 feet from a spider in a web
	70	Watch a long documentary about spiders
	65	Watch a short video clip of a spider
	60	Look at a photo of a tarantula

Jim	Jim's Fear Hierarchy	
Jim avoids social events due to anxiety, resulting in ever greater isolation. In his early therapy sessions, Jim imagines attending a large gathering and lets himself feel the emotions this brings up. He later meets two close friends for coffee, braving his anxiety. Jim gradually attends larger gatherings, staying long enough for his anxiety to come down. Ready to tackle his greatest fear, Jim gives a speech at a large conference hosted by his employer.	100	Give presentation at large conference
	95	Attend holiday office party
	80	Eat at crowded restaurant with 3 friends
	75	Join 2 co-workers for lunch in break room
	70	Meet two close friends for coffee
	65	Greet several co-workers
	60	Imagine attending a large gathering

Luis	Luis's Fear Hierarchy	
Luis does not use public restrooms due to his fear of germs, which severely limits his outings. Luis's therapist asks him to record himself talking about the worst-possible outcome of coming into contact with germs. Luis listens to the recording over and over until it no longer feels so scary. Luis then graduates to spending ten seconds in a very clean public restroom. With practice, he extends this time to five minutes. Finally, he lingers for ten minutes in the filthiest restroom he can find!	100	Stay 10 mins. in a filthy public restroom
	95	Stay 5 mins. in a filthy public restroom
	85	Touch stall and door in public restroom
	70	Enter and stay in clean restroom for 10s
	65	Record & listen to worst-case scenario
	60	Read restroom horror stories
	55	Describe a very dirty public restroom

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