

## Exposure <sup>[1]</sup>

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Up until now, we've mainly focused our attention on the cognitive aspects of social anxiety. Challenging our negative thoughts and confronting our flawed beliefs, are all part of the 'mental' area. Now it's time to change your attitude.

You have arrived at the stage when you know enough about the cognitive aspects of anxiety and it is now time to face your fears up front, to start dealing with them effectively. The best way to do this is through exposure. It might sound scary or even complicated, but this article will tell you everything you need to know about exposure therapy.

### Choose a Specific Situation

First thing you need to do is to choose a specific situation. Use the list from Application 1 to identify potential 'candidates' for the exposure exercise. If you did your homework well, you should have a complete list of specific situations, rated according to your perceived level of anxiety. Since this is your first exposure exercise, start with the least anxiety-producing situation.

### Devise a Game Plan

Having a well-established plan, takes away the confusion and allows you to foresee potential obstacles.

Here's what you should consider during the planning stage:

- **When and where.** Set a date and location for your exposure exercise. For example, if you're having trouble attending a party, your goal should sound like this: Go to ... club/bar, on Friday.
- **What.** Refers to a precise action. What exactly do you want to accomplish? For example, if you're having trouble eating in public, your goal should sound like this: Go to ... restaurant, on Friday and eat an entire meal. Try to provide as much details as possible.
- **For how long.** This usually depends on the nature of your problem. In general, you should stay until your anxiety level drops, but since this might be your first attempt, you could set a specific duration. After several attempts, the final goal should be to wait until your anxiety level drops to normal.

## What If the Situation Makes Being Specific Hard?

For someone who experiences social anxiety during debates, it's somewhat hard to set a specific duration. A situations like this requires you to find other temporal reference points. For example, a specific goal might be to ask at least 5 questions. All and all, it's crucial that you set specific, measurable goals.

## Don't Rush Too Much

A lot of people fail to achieve a successful exposure exercise because they're in a hurry. They want to get it done as fast as possible. You might not know it but this is also a coping strategy, a bad one we might add.

Anxious individuals tend to rush into something, just so they can get it done once and for all. By doing this, they seek to eliminate all the pressure and discomfort associated with facing a certain situation. The same principle can be applied to exposure exercises. Even though it seems like they're doing something good, in reality they're actually missing the whole purpose of this exercise. The idea behind exposure therapy is to face your fears, withstand the negative effects of social anxiety and resist the temptation to run/avoid/escape.

## Imaginal Exposure

In order to increase your chances of success, use your imagination first. Try to envision the entire process, but don't forget to follow the plan. By doing this, your mind becomes somewhat accustomed to the situation, even though the whole process takes place in your head.

## Go for It!

Now that you have a specific game plan, all that's left is to take a 'leap of faith'. Preparation alone is not enough. Sometimes, we simply have to take a chance and face our fears. If you don't succeed in your first attempt, don't get discouraged. You can always pick yourself up, dust yourself off and try again.

## Evaluate Your Performance

After your first attempt, a proper evaluation is a 'must'. It doesn't matter if you failed or succeeded, a thorough evaluation allows you to plan a better exercise for the future. What went well? What went wrong? How can you improve your next attempt? These are some questions that you should ask yourself. In addition, you can use the journal to challenge any negative thoughts that appeared during your exposure exercise.

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