

Are You Afraid of Throwing Up?

What to Know

Some kids and teens are afraid of throwing up or seeing someone puke. This fear can impact going to school, eating, and going to fun places.

Throwing up isn't usually dangerous. It's unpleasant, but anxiety about puking can happen when there is not an actual threat. Anxiety "feels" real and avoiding throwing up or seeing someone get sick "feels" better. These steps might have led to you becoming afraid of puke and throwing up.

Step 1 - The Trigger. Something "triggers" or signals a threat. Maybe someone threw up on you or you puked at school and felt embarrassed. Any of your senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing, or touch) can be involved.

Step 2 - Misinterpretation. The trigger seems far more threatening and real than it is. Your fear can spread to things associated with the trigger that are imagined as more dangerous than they are. Your mind spreads it to anything that might lead to puking, like an uncomfortable feeling in your tummy or the "contaminated" desk of a classmate who got sick.

Step 3 - Anxiety, Fear, and Worry. Imagined danger isn't real, but the experience of anxiety *is* real. Your body may respond to an imagined danger, and your physical reactions can be just as strong for the imagined threat as for actual danger.

Step 4 - Avoidance. When you behave as if the imagined threat is real, you may begin to avoid or escape "danger" to feel relief. When you are scared, relief is awesome! Doing this over and over makes it a habit.

Step 5 - No Correction. When you avoid, escape, or fix a problem you don't disprove the threat. Over time you add more and more "proof" there's real danger. Triggers remain because they are not challenged, and repetition strengthens the cycle.

What to Do

First, you will deliberately face your fear. This is called **exposure**. It's being anxious on purpose. **Contact with actual vomit or the act of vomiting is not a necessary part of exposure.* Second, avoid playing it safe. That's called **response prevention** (preventing your usual response). Maybe you've come up with lots of ways to stay "safe." Write some of them down.

The goal of this exercise is to feel fear and anxiety - and do exposure tasks for an extended period of time. Why would you want to do that?!

1. If you stay in something long enough your body gets used to it.
2. If you do it on purpose, you're choosing it and that gives you control.
3. You might think something bad will happen, but if you do it enough your brain realizes your feelings don't lead to what you're afraid of.
4. Anxiety is sometimes result of mistaken ideas, and exposure can disprove them.

Exposure tasks can include all sorts of things. You can say words, imagine scenes, observe things, watch videos, or actually experience whatever triggers you. It's normal to feel uncomfortable when doing exposures. This discomfort is temporary, and it will decrease as you do and repeat the task. You can probably think of a time when you did or learned something that was hard at first but is now easy. Here are the steps to follow:

1) Make a list. Write down what makes you anxious or upset. Order them from easy to hard. Here's a sample list:

- words like barf, puke, vomit, and so on (easy to hard)
- short sentences with trigger words
- short sentences personalized to aspects of your fear
- paragraphs that describe situations and feelings related triggers
- simple cartoon illustrations of characters vomiting
- pictures of sick people
- pictures of vomit (no people)
- pictures of people vomiting
- animated videos of vomiting
- videos of people vomiting
- fake smelly vomit (purchase online)

Easy



Hard

2) Track your distress. This is called a SUD score (Subjective Units of Distress score). You can use a scale of 1-10, 1-100, or use a white board and draw a line. Write down a number for each of the above items in your list. For example, maybe saying the word "puke" is a 3, while watching a classmate vomit in class is a 10. When you do the exposure tasks, during the exposure, and then at the end of the exposure, write down a number. Once you do harder exposures the first ones may seem easy!

- 10 Terrible**
- 9**
- 8**
- 7**
- 6**
- 5 Pretty Hard**
- 4**
- 3**
- 2**
- 1 Easy**

3) Do Exposure Gradually. If an exposure is too hard, don't force it - but don't give up! Just break it into smaller steps. Here are some ideas to make exposure tasks easier:

- whisper something first or turn the sound off on a video
- watch a video from the other side of the room
- read part of the sentence and leave out the hardest words and then add in one word at a time
- ask someone else to say the words or do a task first
- read silently or out loud
- say the words in silly or scary voices

Write down some ideas that might help you do harder exposure tasks.

4) Time it. Stay with your anxious feelings until they start to subside on their own. Base this on your SUDs. Use the timer on your phone or ask a grownup to help you. Start with 30 seconds and keep doing the exposure task until your distress and anxious feelings lessen. It might take 15 to 30 minutes when you are first starting out.

Where in your body do you feel worry? Anxious feelings?

Keep track of the exposure tasks and beginning and ending SUDs. This will be evidence of your progress when you are doubtful or struggling! Use the form below to track your progress. You might need to practice exposure tasks for several days before you go on to a harder task. Don't take the next step until you get consistently low SUDs (4 or less) on existing exposure tasks.

