

Using Imaginal Exposure to Reduce Your Anxiety

Objective: To lessen the control your fears have over you by indirectly exposing yourself to them.

You Should Know

You may be familiar with the therapeutic concept of directly confronting your fears in person. For example, if you were obsessed with dying from a spider bite, you could expose yourself to holding a spider in your hand. As an alternative, imaginal exposure therapy encourages you to indirectly confront your fears using the strength of your own mind.

What to Do

You will begin by creating a script where you write in graphic detail about your least feared activity or object and then work your way up to what you fear most. Your goal is to become accustomed to interacting with your fears to the point where the debilitating anxiety you experience is diminished. You will achieve this goal by indirectly exposing yourself to your scenarios over and over again through reading or listening to your story until your anxiety dissipates. Although this may be the scariest thing you have ever done, remember that your fears and anxiety are only one small piece of you. You are made of what you value in life and the future you see yourself living.

Follow these steps:

- Choose one activity, event, or object that makes you anxious.
- Expose yourself to this fear at least once every day for one week at a time or until your anxiety level goes down to 3 or lower on a scale of 1 to 10.
- Keep a record of your experience on an Imaginal Response Worksheet.
- Track your anxiety level before and after each exposure to see how your anxiety level changes.
- Fill out an Imaginal Response Worksheet after each week.

Your script will include:

- the initial triggering event;
- any physical sensations, including what you experience with your five senses;
- your thoughts;
- your actions;
- the immediate consequences of your actions, including your feelings;
- the long-term consequences you fear the most.

Plan Your Imaginal Exposure

Commit to at least one session daily for a week. You have several options for the imaginal exposure:

- Read your script to yourself.
- Read it to a trusted friend or family member.
- Handwrite or type it over and over again.
- Listen to it in your car, on your phone, or on any other device.
- Copy it onto Post-it notes that you can attach somewhere you will come in contact with them, such as your bathroom mirror or bedroom mirror.

Do not rush! Take your time and remain in the situation until your anxiety level subsides.

Know that boredom is the opposite of anxiety and is therefore your friend. If you eventually get bored with your script instead of getting anxious, it means that you have conquered your fears.

And don't despair! If you find yourself feeling some anxiety even after you thought you were over this particular fear, re-expose yourself, beginning at the experience where you started feeling the anxiety again.

Imaginal Response Worksheet

First, write down the date and length of the exercise. Rate your anxiety level on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest, before and after the exercise. Add notes as needed; for example, emotions elicited or interesting observations. Record whether you met your goal.

At the end of the week, write down your thoughts, emotions, hesitations, ideas, progress made, or any other inner about your experience that you feel are important or necessary. Do this every week for the duration of your exposure therapy to track your progress.

Did this exercise reduce your anxiety? Why or why not? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

What else can you do to make progress in this area?
