



Facing Your Fears: An Exposure Therapy Guide

(A Worksheet for Managing Anxiety & OCD)

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Process and Discussion Material

1. What is Exposure Therapy?

Exposure therapy is a powerful, evidence-based technique used to gradually reduce fear and anxiety related to specific situations, thoughts, or objects. By facing fears in a structured way, the brain learns that these triggers are not as dangerous as they seem, reducing anxiety over time.

Exposure therapy is a way to train your brain to handle fear instead of running from it. It may sound strange at first—why would you want to face the things that make you anxious? *But here's the key:*

- Anxiety grows stronger when we avoid what scares us.
- Exposure therapy helps break this cycle by gently and safely confronting fears, teaching the brain that discomfort doesn't last forever.
- The part of your brain that sounds the alarm when you're afraid (called the amygdala) needs to experience fear *without* avoidance to learn that the danger isn't real or that the fear will pass. Over time, this reduces sensitivity to those fears.

A Simple Analogy: The Cold Pool (Step by Step)

Imagine you're standing at the edge of a **cold swimming pool**. If you avoid getting in because it feels uncomfortable, you never get used to the water. But if you **ease in gradually**, first dipping your toes, then stepping in up to your knees, then your waist, and finally your shoulders, your body slowly adjusts to the temperature.



At first, each step **feels uncomfortable**, but the more time you spend in the water, the more your body realizes, *Hey, this isn't so bad after all*. Eventually, you can swim around without thinking about the cold anymore.

That's how exposure therapy works. Instead of avoiding the "cold water" (your fears), you **face them in small steps** until your brain learns that the fear isn't as bad as it seems. Over time, the fear loses its grip—just like how the cold water stops feeling so shocking.

- **Engagement for the Group:** Even if you don't struggle with anxiety or OCD, think of something you once feared but overcame. How did facing it help you move forward?



Why Exposure Therapy Works: *Breaking the Cycle* - People with OCD often experience distressing, intrusive thoughts (obsessions) that cause anxiety. To relieve that anxiety, they might engage in compulsions—like checking, counting, avoiding, or repeating behaviors. This provides short-term relief, but in the long run, it makes OCD stronger.

Here's how the cycle works:

1. **An intrusive thought appears** (Example: “What if I forgot to lock the door?”)
2. **Anxiety follows** (“If I don’t check again, something bad might happen.”)
3. **A compulsion is performed** (Checking the lock multiple times or avoiding leaving the house.)
4. **Temporary relief occurs**, but the brain *learns* that the compulsion is necessary, making the fear return stronger next time.

How exposure therapy helps:

- Instead of giving in to compulsions, people practice *not responding* and simply sitting with the discomfort.
- Over time, their brain learns that the fear fades on its own—without needing the ritual or avoidance.

Engagement for the Group: Can you think of a time you faced discomfort and got through it without reacting the way you usually do? What happened?

3. What's the Difference Between CBT and Exposure Therapy?

Many people have heard of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which teaches ways to change negative thoughts. CBT is a very helpful tool, but for OCD, it can sometimes turn into another compulsion—where people spend too much time trying to “think” their way out of anxiety.

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is a specific type of CBT that focuses on actions instead of just thoughts:

- Instead of trying to “argue” with anxiety, people learn to *sit with it and let it pass naturally*.
- The goal is to experience anxiety **without performing a compulsion or avoidance behavior**.

Example:

- Traditional CBT: “Let’s challenge the thought that the door is unlocked and find logical reasons why it’s probably locked.”
- ERP: “Let’s leave the door as it is and resist the urge to check, even though it feels uncomfortable. Over time, the discomfort will fade.”

Engagement for the Group: Have you ever tried to just sit with an uncomfortable thought or feeling instead of acting on it? How did it go?

Key Takeaway: Avoidance and compulsions make anxiety worse in the long run. Exposure therapy helps people train their brains to stop seeing discomfort as an emergency. While it’s tough at first, it becomes easier over time, allowing people to live life with more freedom and less fear



Practical Exposure Techniques: Learning to Face Anxiety Step by Step

1. Fear Hierarchy: Taking It One Step at a Time

One of the best ways to work through fears is **gradual exposure**—starting small and working up to bigger challenges. This is called a **fear hierarchy**.

◆ How It Works:

- First, **list your fears** from least to most distressing.
- Start with **something small** and work your way up.
- Each step helps build confidence so that the next step feels easier.

◆ **Example:** Someone afraid of spiders might create this fear ladder:

- 1 - Looking at a cartoon spider 🕷️
- 2 - Looking at a real photo of a spider
- 3 - Watching a video of a spider moving
- 4 - Seeing a real spider in a glass container
- 5 - Letting a spider crawl on their hand

💬 **Group Discussion:**

- Have you ever conquered a fear by taking small steps? What worked for you?
- Can you think of something in your life that you might need to face step by step?

📄 **Group Activity: Make Your Own Fear Ladder**

1. Think of something that makes you anxious (big or small).
2. Write 3-5 steps that could help you face it gradually.
3. Share with the group if comfortable.



2. “Riding the Wave” of Anxiety

Anxiety **feels like a giant wave**—it **starts small, builds up, peaks, and then naturally fades** on its own. The trick is to **ride it out** instead of panicking or avoiding it.

◆ How It Works:

- Anxiety will rise, but **if you wait it out, it will always come down.**
- **Avoiding** what makes you anxious keeps the fear alive.
- The **more you face it**, the weaker it gets over time.

◆ Example: Imagine you’re **afraid of public speaking.**

- At first, your heart pounds, your hands shake, and you feel like running away.
- But if you **stay in the situation** without avoiding it, your body **gradually calms down.**
- Over time, your brain learns **this isn’t a real threat.**

💬 Group Discussion:

- Can you think of a time you were really nervous, but after a while, it got easier?
- What’s something in life that you just have to “ride out” rather than avoid?

👥 Group Activity: Anxiety Waves Exercise

1. Close your eyes and imagine something that makes you a little nervous.
2. Picture it like a wave—building up and slowly coming down.
3. Focus on **breathing through it** instead of reacting.
4. Open your eyes and share—how did it feel to ride the wave instead of fighting it?



3. The Paradox of Anxiety: The More You Fight It, The Stronger It Gets

◆ Anxiety is like **quicksand**—the more you struggle against it, the deeper you sink. **Or like a swinging pendulum—if you push it hard, it swings back even harder.**

◆ **How Exposure Therapy Helps:**

- Instead of **fighting anxiety**, you learn to **accept it and let it pass.**
- Over time, your brain realizes you don't need to be afraid.

◆ **Example:** Imagine someone struggling with social anxiety. If they **constantly try to force themselves not to feel anxious**, they actually **increase the pressure.** But if they **accept the anxiety and focus on the moment**, it becomes easier to manage.

💬 **Group Discussion:**

- Have you ever made something worse by overthinking or fighting against it?
- What happens when you **let go** of the need to control everything?

👤 **Group Activity: Letting Go Exercise**

1. Everyone closes their fists tightly and holds them for 30 seconds.
2. Feel the tension building.
3. Now, **release** and relax your hands.
4. What did you notice? (Many will say that *holding on* was more painful than *letting go*—just like anxiety.)

Final Takeaway: Exposure therapy teaches that anxiety isn't the enemy—it's just **a wave you can learn to ride.** The more you face fears in small steps, the more **freedom and confidence you gain.**

Closing Discussion Questions:

- ✚ What is something from today's discussion that stands out to you especially when it comes to coping with anxiety?
- ✚ Is there anything you need to change or improve on when it comes to coping skills for stress and anxiety?
- ✚ What skills for managing stress and anxiety are you going to practice going forward?



BONUS MATERIAL FOR FAMILIES: Challenges & Misconceptions About Anxiety

1. Common Misunderstandings About Anxiety

✓ **Myth:** “I need to get rid of anxiety.”

✗ **Truth:** Anxiety is part of life—it’s about learning to **tolerate it**, not erase it.

✓ **Myth:** “Avoiding what makes me anxious keeps me safe.”

✗ **Truth:** Avoidance makes anxiety **stronger**, not weaker.

✓ **Myth:** “People with anxiety should just ‘calm down.’”

✗ **Truth:** Anxiety isn’t a choice—it’s a response from the brain. But exposure therapy **helps retrain** that response.

Group Discussion:

- Have you ever believed any of these myths?
- What’s something you used to believe about anxiety that you may need to look at differently?

2. The Role of Family & Friends in Recovery

◆ Sometimes, loved ones **accidentally make anxiety worse** by offering too much reassurance or helping someone avoid triggers.

◆ The best way to help? **Support without enabling avoidance.**

✓ **Helpful:** “I know this is hard for you, but I believe you can handle it.”

✗ **Not Helpful:** “Don’t worry, I’ll do it for you.”

◆ **Example:** A person with OCD who needs to check the door multiple times may ask family members, “Are you sure it’s locked?” If the family **keeps answering**, it reinforces the compulsion. Instead, they can say, “**I trust you to handle this.**”

Group Discussion:

- How might someone unintentionally reinforce someone’s anxiety by assisting them in avoiding an anxiety-inducing situation? (Can you think of an example?)
- What’s a more supportive way to respond?