



# Exposure Therapy



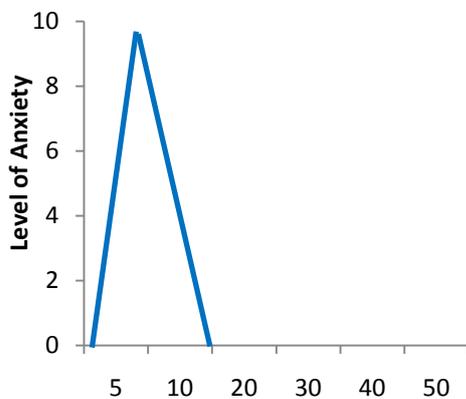
In Low Intensity CBT

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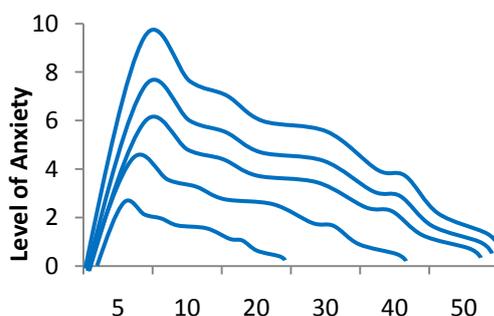
# Exposure Therapy

Exposure is an effective treatment that has helped many people to overcome difficulties with anxiety problems such as specific phobias and agoraphobia. When we feel afraid we may avoid the situation or specific object that makes us fearful. When someone avoids or escapes from the situation their anxiety comes down quite quickly. In the short term this provides some relief from the unpleasant symptoms experienced. However when avoidance or escape strategies are used the person never experiences that the symptoms of anxiety reduce naturally after a period of time. A pattern of avoiding can form and make the person feel just as anxious when confronted with the situation or object the next time. This can lead to a vicious cycle of avoidance and anxiety.



**When avoidance is used anxiety levels come down quickly, but the next time the person faces the situation they can feel just as anxious and a vicious cycle of avoidance and anxiety can form**

Exposure therapy works by breaking into this vicious cycle. This is done by gradually exposing yourself to the feared object or situation, without avoiding or escaping from it. This process is known as habituation. Habituation occurs when you expose yourself over a prolonged period of time to the situations or objects that make you feel fearful until the symptoms of anxiety naturally reduce. The symptoms reduce after a period of time because the body has used up the adrenalin (this is sometimes known as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response) that it produced upon response to the trigger of the situation or object.



**With Exposure Therapy, eventually anxiety will naturally come down without using avoidance or escaping the situation (varies from person to person how long). This is known as habituation**

For exposure to work effectively there are **four necessary conditions** that must be met:

It must be **graded**. It starts gradually with situations or objects that still cause some anxiety but you feel that you can start with. To do this a hierarchy of situations avoided is made first, from the easiest to the most difficult. The exposure exercises start from the bottom of the hierarchy and then when you have habituated to this you can move further up the hierarchy. Along with graded, the other conditions must also be met. **So graded should not be a shortened time to do the exercise.**

It must be **prolonged**. For anxiety levels to come down you must remain in the situation until your anxiety levels come down by at least 50% from the level they were at the start of the exposure exercise. So you need to set aside enough time for your exposure treatment. This may be as long as 1-2 hours, but for some people may take more or less time. The important thing is to remain in the situation until anxiety levels come **down by at least 50% from the start of the exercise.**

It must be **repeated**. For exposure to work and for you to habituate, exposure exercises need to be repeated. This needs to be manageable, but ideally needs to be a number of times per week for best results. **Some people do this daily or every other day, but this can be discussed with your PWP**

It must be **without distraction**. Often people will distract themselves and have things they do to feel better when fearful. For exposure to work, you must experience the level of anxiety that the situation or object causes and confront it, without doing anything to distract yourself or bring down your anxiety levels artificially.



## Recovery Story of Claire

**Claire's story is about someone who used exposure therapy for her specific phobia of spiders, a technique which is aimed to break the cycle of avoidance and anxiety by slowly confronting the feared object in a graded way until anxiety falls.**

Claire was 31 years old. Claire worked as a Primary School Teacher for students with special needs. She really enjoyed her work and was recently promoted. Claire was happy in her relationship with her partner Mark and was due to marry later in the year and go on honeymoon in Australia. Claire and Mark were excited about this, but

Claire had come for help to overcome her difficulties as she had a specific phobia of spiders. Due to living in the UK she had managed this most of her life by avoiding situations and places where she may come across a spider. She would always check the bath and shower for spiders before she got in. She made Mark check the bed and her pillows every night before she would go to bed and also her shoes before she would put them on, and she never went into the garden shed, walked through piles of leaves or picked up things that spiders could be under in the garden. On the odd occasion she did come across a spider she would call Mark to come and deal with it, or if he was not home she would shut the door to the room and block up the gap under the door with towels and wait for Mark to come back. Her mother had bought her a 'spider-catcher' online but she was not able to use it as she thought the spider may 'jump at her' and 'she just would not cope'. Although her she has managed this problem up to now, she had real concerns as to how she would manage being in a different country where spiders were known to be a problem. Claire read the recovery story and information about exposure therapy given to her by her Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) and although she thought it seemed frightening, she decided that this was a treatment that seemed to offer the best solution to the problem and would enable her to enjoy Australia, so she wanted to discuss this with her PWP at her next appointment.

**With the aid of her Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) Claire decided to try Exposure Therapy**

CLAIRE'S GOALS						
Goal number 1						
<i>To be in the same room as a spider</i>				Today's date: <i>24<sup>th</sup> November</i>		
I can do this now (circle a number):						
<input checked="" type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 6
Not at all		Occasionally		Often		Anytime
Goal number 2						
<i>To be able to hold a spider in my hand</i>				Today's date: <i>24<sup>th</sup> November</i>		
I can do this now (circle a number):						
<input checked="" type="radio"/> 0	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 6
Not at all		Occasionally		Often		Anytime

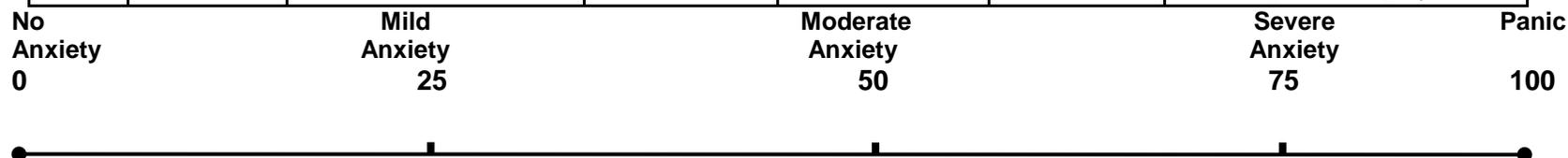
Claire and her PWP therefore collaboratively discussed the treatment stages and how to take the treatment forward to work on her goals. Using graphs the PWP and Claire looked together at exposure and habituation and her PWP explained the necessary conditions. To ensure that the treatment could be graded, Claire created an **Exposure Hierarchy**. This is a graded list of the anxiety provoking situations that Claire could think of in relation to her spider phobia from the easiest to the most difficult. Then, with the help of her PWP, Claire planned in some exposure tasks to complete over the next week using an **Exposure Rating Sheet**. Claire was able to plan when in her week she would be able to do the task. To make sure that the exposure was **graded** she began with the task that was the easiest on her hierarchy. To make sure that the exposure was **repeated** Claire planned to complete the first step several times that week and discussed with her PWP about how many times to repeat this step before moving up the hierarchy. Claire did not put in the duration of the exposure exercise **until afterwards** as she did not know how long it would take for her **anxiety to reduce by 50%** while being in the presence of the feared object (a picture of a spider) so she agreed to complete this part of the worksheet after each exercise to ensure it was **prolonged**. Claire also discussed with her PWP the need for her to carry out each exposure session **without distraction** and to rate her anxiety level before, during and after the exercise using the scale that was on the worksheet and to make any comments that she felt were necessary. She would use this to monitor how the exposure was going and so that this could be discussed in her next session with her PWP.

Claire's Exposure Hierarchy	
<i>To hold a spider in my hand</i>	<i>Most Difficult</i>
<i>To be in the same room as a large spider</i>	
<i>To be in the same room as a small spider</i>	
<i>To be in the same room with a small spider in a jar</i>	
<i>To be in a different room to a spider with the door open</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>To watch a video of someone holding a spider that is moving</i>	
<i>To watch a video of a spider moving</i>	
<i>To look at a picture of a small spider</i>	<i>Easiest</i>

Claire then undertook her exposure exercises and recorded them on her exposure rating sheet.

Claire's exposure rating sheet:

Date & Time	Duration	Exercise	Rating of anxiety level			Comments
			Before Exercise	Start of Exercise	End of Exercise	
Mon 17.30	65 mins	To look at a picture of a small spider	85%	85%	40%	Terrifying but I did it!
Tue 17.30	60 mins	To look at a picture of a small spider	75%	85%	30%	Still horrible but I did it!
Wed 17.30	40 mins	To look at a picture of a small spider	40%	40%	20%	Not as bad this time 😊
Thurs 17.30	40 mins	To look at a picture of a small spider	15%	15%	5%	I felt fine, and want to do it all! but I will do this one last time to check all well before moving up



Claire then discussed her exercises with her PWP and felt able to move up to the next step on her hierarchy which was to watch a video of a moving spider. Claire carried on doing the exercises and moved up hierarchy with the support of her PWP and made good progress. It wasn't always easy, but once she had moved up a few steps on the hierarchy she noticed that it seemed to get easier, and she managed to not only hold one, but two spiders, including a tarantula from a local pet shop that her PWP had arranged she could go and hold. She was really pleased with this and telling her PWP she had done it in her next session. Claire no longer asked Mark to check the bed each night, and did not have to check her shoes before she put them on. She even tidied out the garden shed which she felt was long overdue! Mark and Claire got married and enjoyed their honeymoon in Australia, visiting Sydney and Western Australia. Claire sent her PWP a thank you postcard from Australia with a picture of a big spider on the front!

This booklet is produced with thanks and acknowledgement to Professor David Richards who is author of the Low Intensity CBT Curricula (Richards & Whyte 2008-11). Some content is used here for teaching and clinical purposes and must not be reproduced without relevant permissions, or used for any other purposes.