

Guidelines for Doing Exposure Therapy

Exposure therapy (which is basically facing what you fear) is at the heart of what works for treating anxiety of all kinds and so it is important to know how to do exposures to get the most out of the work you do. Here are some guidelines for how to maximize the benefits you can get from exposures:

1. Accept that you must do exposures regularly. Do them every day (or more) if at all possible.
2. Focus your exposures on the things/behaviors/places that you most frequently avoid or that scare you the most.
3. Turn on your “willingness switch” before you attempt the exposure. You must be willing to experience the discomfort that will inevitably come if you’re doing your exposures correctly. If you don’t feel uncomfortable when doing your exposures, you’re not doing them correctly.
4. We used to think it was important to stay with an exposure until your anxiety came down, but recent evidence suggests that is less important than we thought. Decide beforehand how long you’re going to do the exposure for and then do that. Don’t worry if your anxiety doesn’t come down, just keep doing the exposures.
5. The focus should be on living your life the way you want even if you are anxious.
6. An exposure hierarchy may not be necessary.
7. Before doing an exposure, predict what you think the outcome will be, do the exposure and then see if your prediction was correct. The greater the difference between your prediction and the actual outcome of the exposure, the greater the benefit of the exposure.
8. It’s important to do exposures under different conditions. The more you vary the exposures the better the long term outcome.
9. You don’t want to overwhelm yourself, but be sure the exposure is challenging.
10. If you wait until you can already manage your anxiety before doing the exposures, you will likely have a very long wait.
11. You must do the exposure even though you aren’t totally certain what the outcome will be.
12. Make sure you do whatever you think would be the hardest thing for you. If you have a hierarchy, whatever would be at the top of your hierarchy...you must do that. It’s fine to start with easier exposures (and most people do), but you maximize the benefits and long term outcome of exposure therapy if you eventually face your worst fear.