

Managing behavioral symptoms – Exposure

- **What is it?** Exposure is the process of systematically approaching things that you avoid (i.e., situations, tasks), or have strong urges to avoid, due to feelings of distress or anxiety.
- **When should I use it?** Exposure is a highly effective tool for decreasing feelings of discomfort that lead to avoidance behaviors. It can be a helpful stress management tool to address procrastination or avoidance behaviors that can make stress worse over time because important tasks or problems do not get addressed in a timely manner. Exposure is most often used to decrease feelings of anxiety that lead to behavioral avoidance.
- **Why does it work?** Avoidance is a common and understandable reaction to feeling anxious or uncomfortable. It is effective in the short-term because avoidance of anxiety provoking situations or tasks usually leads to a decrease in distress. Unfortunately, this feeling of relief reinforces avoidance behaviors and makes it more likely that avoidance will occur again in the future in similar situations. As a result, avoidance can create significant problems in the long-term as important problems do not get solved. Additionally, avoidance often leads to people giving up important activities in their lives and can contribute to a feeling that life is “shrinking.”

Exposure is a well researched strategy designed to decrease feelings of anxiety that lead to avoidance behaviors. It works, in part, by the process of **habituation** – the more the brain is exposed to an anxiety provoking or uncomfortable situation without escaping or avoiding, the less distressing the situation becomes over time. This is essentially how all fears are overcome – by facing them. An important element of exposure is confronting feared situations or triggers enough times that new learning can take place and anxiety can decrease.

- **How do I do it?** Exposure is generally easier to do if you start by confronting situations that generate a manageable level of anxiety and then work up to situations that are more difficult. The first step is generating a list, or **hierarchy**, of triggers that are all related to some specific problem or situation that you tend to avoid (e.g., speaking in front of groups of people, being assertive with people in positions of authority). Then, rank these items in order of least difficult to most difficult.

Begin exposure by selecting a low item on the hierarchy and then confront this situation repeatedly. After new learning occurs and this item gets easy enough that you can manage your discomfort without avoiding or having high urges to avoid, move on to the next item on the hierarchy and repeat the same process. Continue moving up the hierarchy when you feel ready until all items have been completed.

Note:

- Most people find that it takes confronting a situation multiple times for it to become easier. Be sure to stick with it and don't give up after the first try if it is difficult.
- The more exposure you do for a particular situation, the better it will work and the more comfortable you will feel over time.
- If an item is too difficult, try dropping back down to a lower item and work on that some more before moving back up.
- Exposure can be difficult at times to do on one's own. It can often be helpful to work on exposure with a therapist who has specialized training in this strategy.