

IBS.Mindovergut.com Psychological Resilience Program

Module 4 (Part 2 of 3): Planning and Engaging in Exposure Work



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Step 1: Identify the target of exposure work

Think about the values work you have been engaging in over the few modules; are there some activities you would LIKE to do, but AVOID due to unwanted negative thoughts and distress?

If you did not experience unwanted negative thoughts and distress, which activities would you most like to do?

Create a list of activities you would like to do but currently avoid

See HANDOUT 4.1 Exposure work - planning and implementing

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Step 2: Breakdown activities

Now that you have a list, think about a couple of activities that for you are really important to work on

Look at couple of key activities and break each of them down to sub-activities, ranging from 0 'easy to do', to 100 'no-overwhelming' (this is commonly referred to as a "Subjective Units of Distress Scale (or SUDS)")

See "Going out for dinner" example

Think about how you can identify activities with different levels of distress, such as going with or without a friend, engaging in the activity at different times or at different locations, etc.

Example SUDS: Going out for dinner

- 100 - Going out for dinner with a potential date at a place I don't know
- 90 - Going out to dinner with a potential date at a place I know
- 80 - Going out to dinner with work colleagues at a place I don't know
- 70 - Going out to dinner with work colleagues at a place I know
- 60 - Going out to dinner with friends at a place I don't know
- 50 - Going out to dinner with friends at a place I know
- 50 - Going out to dinner with a friend at a place I don't know
- 40 - Going out to dinner with a friend at a place I know
- 30 - Getting a takeaway and having friends over
- 20 - Getting a takeaway and having it at home by myself
- 10 - Cooking my own meal and eating it at home by myself

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Step 3: Planning your exposure activity

Step 3

Once you have identified an exposure task (e.g. Going out to dinner with a friend at a place I know - 40/100), develop an action plan, and write down:

- Why is engaging in this exposure activity important to you, how does it align with your values? If you would be able to engage in this task without any distress, what would the reason?
- What is the specific goal of the exposure activity (e.g. Go out for dinner with friend to a place I know)
- What exactly would the exposure activity involve? What would you need to do?
- What do you think you will worry about when engaging in this exposure activity?
- What avoidance strategies might you tend to engage in before, during, or after the exposure task (exposure activities can be undermined by avoidance or safety behaviours e.g. taking spare clothes)

How will you reduce or challenge them?

- Don't engage in exposure activities when you are overwhelmed or highly stressed

What strategies (including those from Modules 1 to 3) will you engage in to reduce impact of unhelpful thinking the distress before, during, or after the exposure task. How will you engage in these strategies, for how long?

After you undertake the exposure task, what reward will you give yourself?

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Avoiding safety behaviours

Safety behaviours are behaviours which one engages in order to avoid the full experience of the exposure activity

Potential example safety behaviours:

- Taking spare clothes
- Relying on others to be involved
- Compulsive behaviours (e.g. checking)
- Subtle avoidance strategies (e.g. avoiding eye contact, sitting in a location closer to the restroom)
- Over the counter medications, such as bulkers to avoid diarrhoea and/or urgency

What safety behaviours may or do you engage in?
Does the safety behaviour need to be an exposure activity?

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Step 4: Engaging in an exposure activity

Step 4

Mentally rehearse the exposure activity

- Identify what you want to do before, during, and after the exposure activity, including engaging in slow mindful breathing (Module 1), mindfulness, grounding, and cognitive defusion (Module 2), and cognitive flexibility (Module 3)
- Identify what it would feel like before, during, and after the exposure activity
- What would you be thinking before, during, and after the exposure activity? Observe the unhelpful thoughts and use strategies that you have found helpful to overcome them (e.g. cognitive defusion, cognitive flexibility)

Spending time to identify and work on unhelpful thoughts is important so that you can utilise these strategies when engaging in the exposure activity

Review the strategies you would use, continue to practice them
Rehearse a few different outcomes, utilise the strategies you found helpful in Modules 1-3 to help observe and manage distress and unhelpful thinking

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Step 5: Engaging in an exposure activity



Step 5

Engage in the exposure activity

- Remember your plan, utilise the strategies that you have practiced
- Remain in the exposure activity for as long as possible
- Only leave the exposure activity when you feel more comfortable and in control

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Step 6: Post exposure activity



Step 6

After you complete an exposure activity:

- REWARD YOURSELF** – exposure work is challenging
- Write down what went well, identify what strategies helped
- Write down what strategies you can adapt or utilise to make your next exposure activity easier to complete
- What went wrong, or could be better?

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Step 7: Engaging in the next exposure activity



Step 7

Choosing the next exposure task

- After repeated exposure work, activities that were associated with high levels of distress (e.g. 80/100) will become less distressing (e.g. 50/100)
- Look to moving to the next exposure activity which is rated at the same level at which you started and feel comfortable (e.g. 40/100)

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