

Questions to Ask Myself to Live the “Exposure Lifestyle”

1) Am I avoiding something because I am uncomfortable about what might happen if I do it (including that I “won’t like how I feel” if I do that)?

If yes...

2) Is it possible that this discomfort is anxiety?

If yes...

3) Is the thing I’m avoiding something that is truly dangerous, unsafe, or unhelpful?

a. Before you answer this question - remember to ask yourself: is it possible that my thinking about this situation could be a “thinking trap”?

i. **Mind Reading:** Thinking you know what others are thinking about you

ii. **Ignoring the Positive:** Thinking you’re a bad person, seeing only the negative side of a situation

iii. **Catastrophizing:** Always thinks the worst outcome could happen

iv. **Jumping to Conclusions:** assuming you know the outcome of a situation

v. **Black and White Thinking:** Thinking that something is either all good or all bad, and nowhere in the middle

b. Is there another way that I could be looking at this situation?

If the answer to Question 3 is YES

The situation is truly dangerous or unhelpful (e.g., being around a poisonous snake, walking through an area that has lots of violent crime, an important deadline is right around the corner):

Your anxiety alarm is going off at the right time! It is okay (and good!) to do what anxiety tells you to do!

If the answer to Question 3 is NO

The situation is NOT objectively dangerous (e.g., avoiding trying new things, meeting new people) or has a VERY LOW probability of being dangerous (e.g., flying on a plane, getting in a car):

Your anxiety alarm may be extra sensitive – consider designing an exposure plan to help yourself face the fear!

How to Make an Exposure Plan

- 1) List all the things you are avoiding because of this fear
- 2) Create a fear ladder (“hierarchy”) – Put the list of situations in order from easiest (least scary) to hardest (most scary)
 - a. Things on the hierarchy should not be truly dangerous, unsafe, or unhelpful (e.g., if you are scared of spiders, playing with a poisonous spider should not go on the hierarchy)
 - b. You may need to break things down into smaller steps (see example below)
- 3) Gradually face fears on the hierarchy. It is generally good to start with items that make you feel a little less anxious and then work your way up.

Example Hierarchy for Social Anxiety:

Things I am avoiding:

- a. Talking to new people
- b. Making new friends
- c. Avoiding being myself – (afraid to show my personality to new people)
- d. Avoiding being independent with other kids

Items for Fear Hierarchy for **meeting new people/making a new friend**:

- i. Smiling at someone
- ii. Waving to someone
- iii. Saying hello in passing
- iv. Introducing yourself
- v. Asking a question (e.g., “what time is it?”)
- vi. Sit near the person
- vii. Say something related to what you’re doing
- viii. Exchange phone numbers
- ix. Facebook/Instagram friend
- x. Direct message on social media
- xi. Send a text message
- xii. Ask someone to hang out (movies, coffee, etc) in a group
- xiii. Ask someone to hang out individually

Before you Begin the Exposure:

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What is my goal for this exposure?
2. What am I worried will happen?

During the Exposure

Question to ask yourself:

1. Am I doing anything during the exposure to “protect myself” from being anxious? Remember to look out for Safety Behaviors (i.e., things you do to try to make yourself feel less anxious that do not affect the “true safety” of the situation)!!

Examples:

- i. Wearing sunglasses out in public to avoid making eye contact
 - ii. Only approaching people who “have” to be polite in their response (e.g., Starbucks baristas)
 - iii. Ending a conversation early because you’re afraid that it will not end well
2. Am I allowing myself to experience anxiety? Be careful about distracting yourself from learning that you can cope!

After you have completed the Exposure:

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Did I do what I set out to do?
2. Did what I was worried about happen? (e.g., getting rejected)
3. Was it as horrible as I thought it would be? (e.g., person was mildly unfriendly vs. person pointed at me and laughed)
4. Even if it didn’t go perfectly, did I cope with the situation? (i.e., stayed in the situation even though I was feeling very, very anxious)

Reward yourself for your effort-- you did it! Pat yourself on the back and give yourself a compliment – even if it didn’t go perfectly. Treat yourself to something special for living the exposure lifestyle!