

HANDOUT 4: Challenging Toilet Anxiety Through Thinking Straight and Behaviour Exposure Work

This handout provides a brief introduction to engaging in exposure work. That is, developing a plan to gradually re-introduce you to using public toilets. Exposure work is a key technique utilized to overcome phobias and situations that cause anxiety, such as using public toilets. Exposure work is most successful when initial anxiety management techniques (e.g., slow/relaxed breathing, identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts) are well practiced. Another essential key to utilizing exposure techniques is taking time to practice and not trying to do something too overwhelming.

Taking action to test unhelpful thoughts:

- It is important to build up a body of experience that contradicts unhelpful thoughts as arguing against them rationally may not be enough
- The best way to do this is to act on your rational answers and find out for yourself whether they are in line with the facts and helpful to you, or whether they need to be changed. This allows you to test your answers in the real world and form new habits
- Like scientists, people make predictions (eg., 'If I press the switch, the light will come on') and act on them. Negative emotions make it difficult for us to make realistic predictions, or to test them with an open mind
- When sad, anxious or depressed people make predictions (e.g., 'I won't be able to cope', 'Everyone will think I'm an idiot', 'If I say what I think, I will be rejected'), they tend to see them as facts, not as hunches which may or may not be correct
- Because of this assumption, you might not step back from the situation and look at the evidence to test your prediction

Steps to test unhelpful thoughts:

1. Identify the situation and state your prediction clearly (the negative automatic thought)
2. Review the existing evidence for and against it. What does past experience tell you, when you look at it objectively? What would you predict for another person in this situation?
3. Work out an action plan which will help you find out if your prediction is correct or not
4. Make a note of the results. There are two main possibilities:
 - I. Your prediction is not borne out. That is, your unhelpful thoughts are shown by experience to be incorrect. This demonstrates through action (rather than just argument) how distorted unhelpful thinking can be. So much the better
 - II. Your prediction is borne out. That is, your negative thought is shown by experience to be correct. Do not despair. This is valuable information. Find out what you were doing to bring about this result. Can you work out ways of handling the situation differently in the future so that things turn out better? This may involve behaving differently so as to change the situation. Of course, some situations cannot be changed; even so, you may still be able to change how you think about an unchangeable situation, so that you feel differently about it. When you have decided what needs to be done, work out a new action plan
5. Draw conclusions on the basis of your results. What do they tell you about yourself, or about the way negative emotions affect you? What general rules can you draw up that will help you to deal better with similar situations in the future?

Dealing with avoidance – graded exposure:

- People with toilet anxiety often find themselves becoming restricted in their activities as they worry about entering situations that might make them feel anxious
- When someone with toilet anxiety approaches a potentially distressing situation and then avoids it in some manner, future anxiety is actually increased. This is because the drop in anxiety following the “escape” from the situation tells the brain that avoidance was sensible, and strengthens the avoidance behaviour
- This means that symptoms of anxiety don’t actually stop, even though you might feel less anxious when you avoid a situation. Instead, you are telling your brain that more and more situations are “dangerous” and should be avoided, increasing your avoidance behaviour in the future
- *What then is the cure?* If the fear is reinforced by leaving the situation, what would happen if you stayed put? Actually, if you stayed in the situation for an hour or so the fear would eventually go and the fear the next time you entered that situation would be less. However few people with situational fears can actually stay in the situation for the one or two hours required for a really big panic to wear off. So they keep avoiding those situations

Dealing with avoidance – graded exposure:

- The best remedy is to control the level of the panic associated with experiencing anxiety symptoms using hyperventilation control (slow breathing technique), and rational thinking (challenging unhelpful thoughts), and then stay in a situation which you are 75% sure of being able to handle until you are calm
- But how do you organise such experiences? Firstly, make a list of all the situations in which you are likely to experience toilet anxiety symptoms. Then rank those situations in terms of your need to avoid them - that is, from those situations that you don't like but never avoid, to those situations which you always avoid. Rank each out of 100 (100 - being the most extreme anxiety provoking situation you could imagine, to 0 - being situations that cause no anxiety). Identify about 6-10 anxiety provoking activities which range across the 0-100 range

Avoidance:

- Situational fears are fears of places or situations in which you think that toilet anxiety symptoms might occur
- You may have experienced anxiety in that same situation previously, or it might have occurred in a similar situation. However, you do not need to have experienced it previously to have developed a fear of that situation
- Once a situational fear is established, it may be strong enough that you never again enter that situation, which means that there is no possibility of you realizing that the situation is not as bad as you originally thought it was
- Exposure to distressing situations must be gradual, otherwise there is a risk of strengthening the avoidant behaviour further
- First, the person must learn to master situations associated with only mild anxiety and then progressively master situations associated with greater anxiety. This process is known as *desensitisation*

Planning your program:

- A desensitisation program requires that you identify specific goals that you wish to achieve and then break them down into small steps. Each step is practised and mastered before moving onto the next step. The skills you have learned for the control of anxiety and hyperventilation are to be utilised in each step:
 1. Draw up a list of goals which you would like to be able to achieve. These should be specific goals that vary from being mildly to extremely difficult. You may have many goals but the ones which are relevant are those which involve anxiety in specific situations
Eg. "I want to attend a social function for more than half an hour".
 2. Break each of these goals down into smaller goals which enable you to work up to the main goal a little at a time. If it is easier for you, you may want to try them with a friend or partner and then try them alone
Eg. A) Attend a small social function in a familiar place for 30 minutes
B) Attend a small social function in an unfamiliar place for 30 minutes
C) Attend a small social function in a familiar place for 45 minutes

The 75% rule:

- This rule means that you only undertake activities that you are 75% certain will be successful. If you use this rule you can determine if you are going from one step to another with too big a jump - that is, attempting a level that you are not ready for
- If you feel less than 75% certain of controlling your anxiety symptoms, modify that step so as to increase your confidence. Note: Do not use the 75% rule as a reason for avoiding activities - you can always modify the activity in some way
- The most important rule about desensitising your fears is not to concentrate on the specific level of certainty of success but to approach a situation with the attitude that managing panic is within your capabilities

Implementing your program:

1. *Make sure that you perform some activity related to your toilet anxiety symptoms every day.* Avoidance makes fears worse. Avoiding something one day will set you back two days as you will have built on the fear you are trying to reduce. If you are having a bad day you should always do something, even if it's only going over the steps which you have already mastered
2. *Confront a situation frequently and regularly until you overcome the fear.* Many fears need to be confronted frequently (i.e. 3-4 times/week) at first otherwise your fear will rise again by the time you do it next. Once you have largely overcome the fears you need only do it less frequently. The general rule is: *the more you fear it, the more frequently you need to confront it*
3. *After you successfully complete one goal get onto the next one.* When you have finished one, move on to another more difficult goal
4. *Carefully monitor and record your progress.* Keep a diary of your goals, steps and achievements, together with comments about how you felt and how you dealt with particular situations. This will help you to both structure your progress and give you feedback as to how you are doing. It will also provide you with the opportunity to collect information about how you have tackled situations, which will no doubt be of help in the future

Practicing the steps:

1. Use the standard relaxation exercises before you go out. Get yourself as calm as possible
2. Perform all activities in a slow and relaxed manner. Give yourself plenty of time
3. Mentally rehearse your activity. Imagine what you might say or do, and rehearse some coping statements
4. Monitor your breathing rate at regular intervals e.g., once every 5-10 minutes.
5. When the circumstance allows it, stop your activity at the point at which you become anxious. Find a place to sit down or rest and wait for the fear to pass as it will within a few minutes, and practice slow breathing exercises
6. Do not leave a situation until you feel yourself to be calming down. Never leave the situation out of fear - face it, accept it, let it fade away and then either move on or return. If you do not do this you will see it as a failure and lose confidence
7. Try to remain in the situation as long as possible. If you observe the above directions, the longer you remain in a situation the calmer you will become and the faster you will overcome your fears
8. Remember after every exposure work, no matter if it is not successful (or only partially successful), identify the positives – **it's not what you don't do, but what you do do that's important!** Problem solve the difficulties and how you can improve next time. And most importantly, reward yourself for engaging in the exposure work!

Imaginal exposure:

- In some cases, it may be difficult to approach your goal in reality. Some steps can then be practiced in imagination, which is a slower form of exposure than real-life exposure, though it can be useful for adding in-between steps
- You will need to specify the characteristics of the type of step you would ideally like to perform, write this on a card or series of cards and then practice the activity specified on the card in your imagination after your next relaxation module
- You will need to use cards so that you can read predetermined details about the situation that you are 'rehearsing'. Simply imagine yourself performing the activity in a calm, collected manner
- If you imagine yourself getting overly anxious or panicking, imagine yourself controlling your anxiety using breathing control, thinking straight, and relaxation. Then continue with the imaginal exposure
- Since you are using your imagination, you can imagine yourself handling the situation in a calm and competent manner, even if you do not think you could handle it that way in reality

Exercises in planning activities:

A goal can always be broken down into a series of smaller, easier steps, by varying the following:

1. Whether you do the activity alone or with a companion
2. Whether it is quiet or rush hour
3. How far you are from home
4. How long you stay there
5. How many things you do while you are there
6. How far you go

Using various combinations of these you can easily build up a set of steps that enable you to more easily achieve your goals

Remember an essential skill in overcoming situational fears is knowing that:

- Avoidance makes fears worse, therefore, engage in a situation that is related to your anxiety symptoms every day
- Success comes through careful planning, and engaging in the behavioural challenge frequently and regularly (i.e., 3-4 times/week)
- After successfully completing one goal, get onto the next one
- Monitor and record your progress

Exposure diary:

Over the next week, you are asked to engage in the exposure task you planned. Using the exposure diary, write down:

1. **The day/time.**
2. **The situation.** What was the exposure task?
3. **Anxiety % (before).** What was your level of anxiety before the exposure task out of 100 (0=no anxiety - 100=extreme anxiety).
4. **What were you saying to yourself (before).** What were you saying to yourself (e.g., negative automatic thoughts) before engaging in the exposure task?
5. **Anxiety % (after).** What was your level of anxiety after the exposure task out of 100 (0=no anxiety - 100=extreme anxiety).
6. **What were you saying to yourself (after).** What were you saying to yourself (e.g., negative automatic thoughts) after engaging in the exposure task?
7. **What strategies did I engage in to help reduce my distress? What strategies can I use in the next exposure activity?**

Tips to help you in your exposure challenge:

- Choose an activity that is not too anxiety provoking
- Practice your coping strategies, such as relaxation and positive self-talk
- Make sure you engage in relaxation before and during your exposure task
- Give it enough time to work, remember this is something you develop over time
- Don't give up too quickly, it can feel overwhelming, but keep at it
- Make sure you reward yourself, even if you weren't as successful as you hoped
- Allow yourself plenty of time so you do not feel rushed

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If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to email Dr Simon Knowles: sknowles@swin.edu.au

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