

# Exposure to bodily sensations

## About exposure to bodily sensations

Exposure is one of the best methods for learning to manage anxiety. This method involves gradually confronting things that make you uncomfortable and gradually exposing yourself to things that are frightening. The aim is to give you the opportunity to learn new responses. This means that you learn that situations previously interpreted as dangerous are usually less threatening than you believed and that you are able to cope with the frightening feelings they evoke.

Working with exposure can be tough and uncomfortable because you expose yourself to what you usually avoid. Keep in mind that the more you practice, the easier it will become.

Because there are many different things that can cause anxiety and discomfort, there are also different approaches to exposure. You will learn about exposure to bodily sensations, which means exposing yourself to bodily reactions that arouse anxiety.

## Focus on bodily sensations

It is common for panic disorder and health anxiety, for example, to lead to an increased focus on what is happening in your body. When you focus excessively on what is happening in your body, it means that you will notice even small and harmless things that you otherwise would not have noticed. This means that you become afraid of experiencing certain bodily sensations because you are both afraid of getting an illness and that you will have a panic attack because of the fear. The natural response is therefore to do everything possible to avoid whatever causes the discomfort.

## Avoiding discomfort

What is the disadvantage of avoiding what causes discomfort? Avoidance behaviours often work well in the moment. The problem is that when you avoid what you find unpleasant, you will continue to feel anxiety about it. Avoidance perpetuates the problem and, in the worst case, can cause it to worsen.

For example, you might avoid jogging because you are afraid that an increased heart rate will remind you of your last panic attack. In that case, it may feel good in the moment to avoid jogging, but by avoiding the discomfort, there is a greater risk that the fear will continue to create problems in the future.

## Exercise: Exposure to bodily sensations

You will now have the opportunity to explore what happens if you stay in the situation instead of escaping through some form of avoidance behaviour. The purpose of the

exercise is to teach the body that the sensations you experience are not necessarily dangerous.

You should track and identify which symptoms are unpleasant for you. Feel free to try all the examples in the list and to add your own suggestions if you come up with one. Rate each activity 0–10 where 0 = no anxiety and 10 = worst possible discomfort. Write the number down after the activity. Example

Hyperventilate for a minute. 8

- Jog in place for one minute
- Spin in place for 90 seconds
- Hyperventilate for one minute
- Breathe through a straw for two minutes
- Shake your head from side to side for 30 seconds
- Hold your breath as long as you can.
- Hold your head between your legs for 90 seconds and quickly lift your head up.
- Tense your body as much as you can for one minute.
- Be in a closed space for five minutes
- Imagine your worst scenario
- Drink coffee
- Stare at your own reflection for three minutes
- Swallow hard four times as fast as you can
- Your own example

Choose the exercise(s) that caused the most discomfort and repeat these until the discomfort is estimated to be a maximum of two. Do the exercise several times throughout the day. By repeatedly eliciting the bodily sensations that you find highly unpleasant, you teach your body that the reaction is not dangerous. This relearning breaks the link between physical symptoms and perceived danger, meaning your body no longer needs to respond with anxiety.