

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# Exposures For Fear Of Flying



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## Description

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The fears that people struggle with can be organized according to their focus. Tolin (2012) suggests that the most common sources of fear relate to:

- Specific situations or objects (e.g., fear of dogs, fear of crowded places)
- Bodily sensations (e.g., heart palpitations, dizziness)
- Social and performance situations
- Obsessive fears
- Excessive worries
- Post-traumatic fears (e.g., beliefs that one is still in danger even after the threat has passed, or memories of trauma which are accompanied by high levels of fear)

Exposure is one of the most effective interventions for overcoming fear (Hofmann & Smits, 2008). It involves individuals repeatedly facing their fears to reduce their fearful responses and reverse the patterns of avoidance that perpetuate them (Springer & Tolin, 2020). Exposure is a first-line intervention for some conditions (such as phobias), and is an essential treatment component for many others (such as panic, social anxiety, OCD, and PTSD).

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*"Exposure methods share the common feature of confrontation with frightening, yet realistically safe, stimuli."*

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Rothbaum & Schwartz, 2002

Exposure-based interventions have been incorporated into several therapies, most notably cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and can take various forms:

- **In-vivo exposure.** The client confronts their fear in real life. These fears may include objects, situations, bodily sensations ('interoceptive exposure'), and thoughts.
- **Imaginal exposure.** The client confronts their fear using their imagination or a narrative (e.g., re-reading a written description of their fear). Imaginal exposure is often used when exposure is impractical or impossible (e.g., the client's fear relates to a traumatic event or potential disaster).
- **Virtual reality exposure.** This client faces their fear using virtual reality (e.g., giving a presentation to a computer-generated crowd of strangers). Like imaginal exposure, virtual reality is often useful when in-vivo exposure is difficult to facilitate.

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Theoretical accounts of exposure-based treatments have developed over the past century. Two of the currently most influential accounts are derived from emotional processing theory and inhibitory learning theory:

- **Emotional processing theory** proposes that fear is represented by associative networks that maintain information about the feared stimulus, behavioral fear responses, physiological fear responses, and their meaning (Foa & Kozak, 1986). When an individual encounters a stimulus that resembles the feared stimulus, the fear representation is activated. Kaczirkin and Foa (2022) propose that a fear structure is pathological when “the relationship among stimuli, responses, and their meaning do not match reality, such as when it is activated for safe stimuli”, and that the fear structure is maintained by avoidance behaviors, which prevent new learning. Exposure modifies this pathological fear structure by first activating it, and then providing new information that disconfirms inaccurate or pathological associations in the fear structure. Emotional processing theory suggests that habituation within sessions leads to habituation between sessions, and subsequently longer-term change, although more recent research suggests that habituation is not a strong predictor of treatment effectiveness.
- **Inhibitory learning theory (ILT)** proposes that the threat association learned during fear acquisition is not erased, replaced, or modified by new learning during exposure (Craske et al, 2008; Tolin, 2016). Instead, the fear-inducing stimulus becomes ambiguous, with two meanings that both live in memory and compete for retrieval. Craske describes how a client might “enter therapy with a threat expectancy, such as ‘If I panic, I might die’ or ‘If I am socially rejected, it would be unbearable’. As a result of exposure therapy, a competing non-threat expectancy develops, such as ‘If I panic, I am unlikely

to die’ or ‘If I am socially rejected, I will survive’. After completion of exposure therapy, the level of fear that is experienced when the stimulus is re-encountered is dependent upon which expectancy is activated. Activation of the original threat expectancy will enhance the expression of fear, whereas activation of the exposure-based non-threat expectancy will lessen fear expression”. Inhibitory learning theory helps to explain why fear can return easily, even in people who have successfully completed treatment, and why habituation does not seem to be important for exposure therapy to be effective.

While the mechanisms underlying exposure are debatable, the stages of exposure are relatively consistent:

1. The client identifies a fear stimulus they are willing to confront.
2. The client describes what they expect will happen when they face the stimulus.
3. The client exposes themselves to the stimulus for a prolonged period, without distraction.
4. Changes in the client’s fear levels are monitored.
5. After exposure, the client and therapist reflect on what has been learned (e.g., whether the stimulus is as dangerous as the client initially thought).
6. The client repeats the exposure.

Exposure is usually preceded by the development of a fear ladder (sometimes referred to as an “exposure hierarchy”) (Beck et al., 1985). Fear ladders are an idiographic list of stimuli (such as activities, situations, or sensations) that generate fear for the client and are avoided. Once the list is generated, items are ranked and ordered according to the level of fear they generate.

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The *Exposures For Fear of Flying* information handout is designed for clients struggling with a fear of airplane flights. Fear of flying, or 'aviophobia', is one of the most prevalent specific situational phobias, affecting up to 18% of individuals (Eaton et al., 2018), although its prevalence may be greater (Oakes & Bor, 2010). A variety of factors have been implicated in the maintenance of fear of flying, including attentional processes, cognitive biases, avoidance, and safety behaviors. Most notable of these safety behaviors is the use of alcohol and anxiolytic medication (Clark & Rock, 2016).

This handout provides examples of exposure exercises for addressing these fears. Therapists can use this tool to:

- Identify feared stimuli that are relevant to the client.
- Inform case conceptualizations and formulations.
- Normalize fear-related triggers.
- Discuss what exposure is likely to entail.
- Develop idiographic items for fear or exposure hierarchies.
- Inform exposure exercises and behavioral experiments.
- Identify safety behaviors the client should refrain from using during exposure.

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# Instructions

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## Suggested Question



*We've talked about how exposure can help people overcome fear. I'd like to show you some examples of how other people have used it to address difficulties like yours. We can use these examples to think about which exposure exercises you might find helpful. Can we look at it together?*

Useful questions to support this tool include:

## Suggested Questions



- *Which items on this list would make you feel afraid or anxious?*
- *Which items would you usually avoid because of your fear?*
- *Which items would you endure with distress or discomfort?*
- *Can you think of any other scenarios that would make you feel afraid?*
- *Which safety behaviors do you use to cope with your fear?*
- *Can you think of any other safety behaviors or coping strategies you sometimes use?*
- *Does the process of facing your fears make sense? How might you start exposure?*
- *How could you enhance the exposure(s) you are planning to do?*

Other resources that supplement this handout include:

- **Facing Your Fears and Phobias** (Guide)
- **Fear Ladder** (Worksheet)
- **Exposure Session Record** (Worksheet)
- **Maximizing the Effectiveness of Exposure Therapy** (Information handout)

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## References

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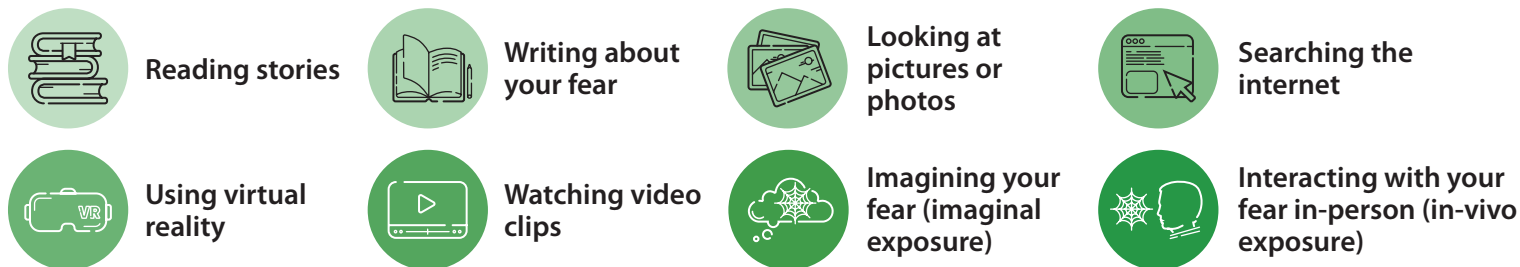
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# Exposures For Fear Of Flying

Are you afraid of flying? Do you feel anxious during plane trips? Perhaps you avoid using planes wherever possible or endure them with a great deal of fear and discomfort.

Fear gets stuck in place when you avoid the thing that scares you rather than approaching it. **Exposure** is an effective treatment that involves facing your fears in a controlled and prolonged way. It helps you learn that the situation isn't dangerous, so your fear declines.

There are many ways you can face your fear. Exposure could include the following:



## Ways to face your fear

- Look at photos of stationary planes.
- Look at photos of planes taking off and landing.
- Read factual information about a common type of plane (e.g., a Boeing 747).
- Ask a friend to describe a neutral flight they had.
- Read a pilot's autobiography (e.g., *Skyfaring* by Mark Vanhoenacker).
- Visualise being on a gentle flight.
- Listen to airplane noises during take-off.
- Watch video footage from the inside of a plane mid-flight.
- Play a flight-simulator video game on a computer or in VR.
- Visit an airport to watch planes take off and land.
- Ask a friend to describe turbulent flight.
- Watch a film featuring a stressful flight (e.g., *Sully*).
- Visualize being on a flight during turbulence.
- Visit an aircraft museum.
- Board and sit on a stationary plane.
- Sit in a plane during taxiing.
- Take a short flight (aisle seat, window seat).
- Take a longer flight (aisle seat, window seat).
- Have a flying lesson.
- Contact your local airport to book a fear of flying course.

## Safety behaviors

Sometimes people do things to help them 'cope' with their fear during exposures (and at other times). If you are afraid of flying, you might:

- Use distractions or relaxation exercises before, during, or after exposure.
- Use substances during exposure (e.g., drinking or taking medication before or during a flight).
- Avoid looking around during exposure (e.g., watching a film or reading during a flight).
- Grip onto your armrest during exposure.

Psychologists call these coping strategies 'safety behaviors'. If you use them, you might conclude that they were the reason you stayed safe, but the truth is you don't need them. For exposure to be most effective, you will need to practice 'letting go' of these behaviors.

Some exposure exercises are not appropriate for everyone. Before you attempt these exposure exercises, it is recommended that you have an assessment with a mental health professional who has experience of treating fears and phobias.



Exposure exercises are challenging: you're being asked to face your fears on purpose. Remember that the exposures presented here are just suggestions: you can adapt them, or think of new ones, with the support of your therapist.



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