

Systematic Desensitization: Exposure at a Distance

By the time you reach this stage, your client should be comfortable watching videos about their feared/ object situation.

This next stage involves live exposure at a distance. This can be conducted in different ways, depending on the feared situation. For example, a fear of flying may involve a trip to an airport watching planes take off and land safely. A fear of spiders may involve exposure to a dead spider or a live spider trapped under a glass. A fear of contamination may involve a visit to a washroom outside the home, or a rubbish tip.

Social anxiety may involve attending a social event or crowded place. Please be imaginative about how to progress to this penultimate stage of treatment and be sure to accompany your client in person as support.

As you follow the six-step process, record the client's anxiety in the table below.

Six-step process

1. Ask the client how they feel about having a contained real-life encounter with their feared object or triggering situation at a distance. Talking about it first may arouse some anxiety. After discussing the encounter, ask them to rate the intensity of their anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10.
2. Guide the client through a relaxation practice, such as progressive muscle relaxation or deep breathing. After the relaxation, ask them to rate the intensity of their anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10.
3. Next, arrange a real-life encounter with the client's feared situation, accompanied by you at a distance. Some examples are given above. Agree that the encounter will end as soon as they wish, but encourage them to stay with it for up to ten minutes or more if possible.
Agree this plan and if you like, make a written contract to assure the client they are in complete control. Once the plan has been agreed, ask your client to rate their anxiety levels again.
4. Immediately before the planned encounter, ask them to rate the intensity of their anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10, such as nearby (if visiting a location) or if in the office, just before exposure to the object.
5. During the distant exposure, ask them how they are feeling, and to rate their anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10. Remind your client to practice deep controlled breathing, in through the nose to a count of 3 and out through the mouth to a count of 3.
6. After the distant exposure ends (whenever the client requests or has agreed), ask your client to rate the intensity of their anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10. Discuss repeating this for a longer period next time or as homework in the company of a friend or relative.

Anxiety scores

You enter the scores here for each step on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest level of anxiety.

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6

Follow up

You can ask the client to repeat this exercise in the company of a friend or relative while practicing relaxation, using the Systematic Desensitization Homework Worksheet.

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