

## S8 *Exposure treatment*

The aim of this part of your treatment is to reduce and overcome the negative emotions you experience and give up critical negative self-judgements about your body or body image. This involves:

1. confronting feelings and perceptions that you are likely to have been avoiding;
2. actively changing your stance (thoughts and judgements) towards yourself and your body).

In order to do this, you will be actively using all the skills you have developed in mindfulness, non-judgemental stance and compassion, and drawing on your experiences from the 'Changing unhelpful habits' worksheet.

This exercise is going to involve viewing yourself in a full-length mirror.

### 1. **Confronting feelings and perceptions that you are likely to have been avoiding**

The basic principle of this element of your treatment is exposing you to 'stimuli' that trigger negative thoughts and feelings until they reduce and your capacity to tolerate these feelings increases. This principle is called **habituation**. Using the mirror, we will be exposing you to your thoughts, feelings and judgements about your body.

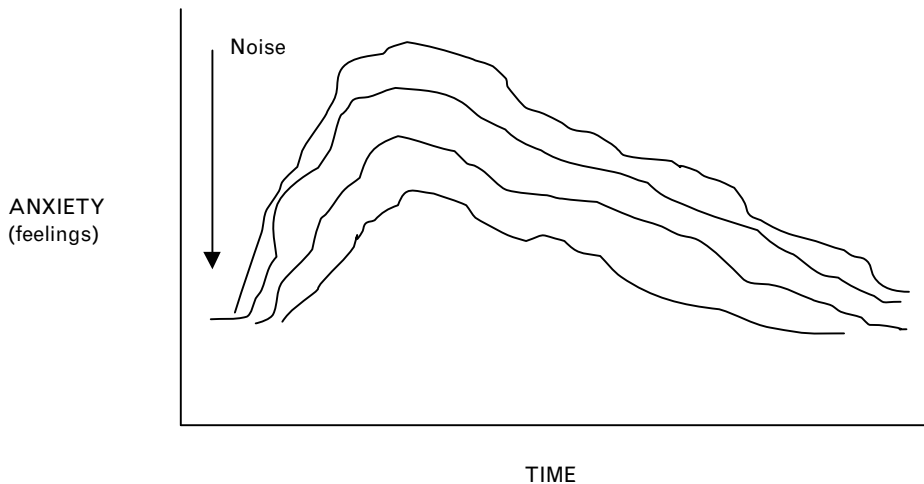
This may sound scary, so to illustrate the principle of habituation we'll use a simple example. Imagine you hear a really loud noise right now. Your response would probably be an immediate startled response (e.g. 'Oh my goodness what's that?!') and your anxiety could be quite high. The anxiety would stay high until you realised that the noise did not prove any threat to you, or signal any imminent danger. At this point your anxiety and thoughts would tail off, and fade.

Now imagine that you hear the noise a second time; initially, your startle response would be quite high, but as you remember your previous experience it would be less sharp and would last a shorter time (e.g. 'Oh



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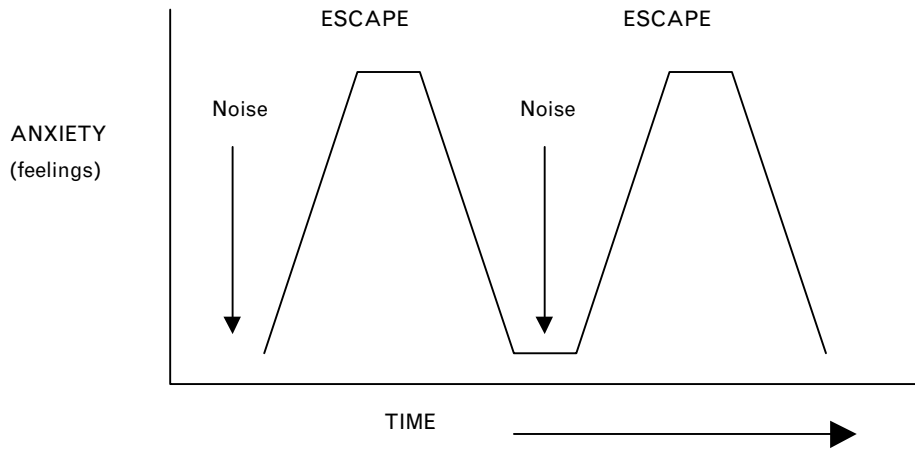
it's just that sound again'). This pattern would continue, until hearing the noise produced very little response at all (see the anxiety/noise/time graph below).



This is the basic process by which **exposure** works. The more frequently you expose yourself to the thing that makes you anxious, the more you get used to it and the more your anxiety should decrease. Research shows that, provided exposure continues for long enough, your anxiety will always eventually reduce.

Relating this to the work you have done so far, through the checking and avoiding behaviours that you have previously identified, you have been *avoiding* facing your thoughts and feelings about your body. For exposure to work you will need to actively confront the negative emotions that you have previously been avoiding. These emotions could be anxiety, disgust, shame or a combination of these. They are made up of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and judgements.

Another crucial point is to *stay* with your negative emotion. If you escape too early from experiencing the emotion – as, for example, by fleeing from the room in the case of a sudden noise – you would not learn that the noise was not a threat and therefore every time you heard the noise, your anxiety response would be the same. You may feel better in the short term if you escape, but you will be equally afraid next time you hear the noise (see anxiety/escape/time graph below).



Avoidance is similar to escape in that it effectively reduces your distress in the short term but in the long term perpetuates the problem and prevents you from learning other coping strategies. So, by avoiding a confrontation with your thoughts and feelings about your body (through checking and avoiding behaviours or compulsive exercise), you are ‘escaping’ from experiencing negative emotions and therefore preventing them from naturally decreasing.

The important point is to persevere with the ‘exposure’ until the negative emotions start to lessen, and to be prepared to go on until they do. Everyone needs a different amount of time for this. Rating your distress on a 10-point scale or as a percentage score out of 100 can be helpful.

## 2. Actively changing your stance (thoughts and judgements) towards yourself and your body

In addition to exposing yourself to the distress (i.e. negative emotions) you feel at looking at your body, you also need to address the thoughts, beliefs and judgements that occur at that time. In order to do so, you will need to use the building blocks that you have been developing in your treatment so far. To effectively change your stance towards your body, you will need to access your skills in both **mindfulness** and **non-judgemental** stance and your experiences of taking on difficult challenges.

To illustrate the importance of exposure to negative emotions and to challenging judgements and thoughts, consider the following example:



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Imagine that Anna, a recruitment consultant, is getting ready for a date. She has been asked out by Ben, a man she works with and has liked for a while. She has been looking forward to the evening for a long time and has bought a new outfit especially for the occasion. On the night she is filled with anxiety; what if he doesn't like what she is wearing? What if they have nothing to talk about? What if he thinks she looks fat? She stands in front of the mirror and looks at herself in her outfit; her head is immediately full of thoughts and judgements about her body and her appearance. 'My stomach looks massive in this dress. I look really fat. I look awful.' Her anxiety is so high that she decides it would be best to phone Ben and cancel their date. She stays in all night in front of the television; her anxiety has been relieved in the short term. However, her anxiety begins to rise again at the thought of seeing Ben at work on Monday morning.



Now, imagine the situation again. Anna has been asked out by Ben, and is standing in front of the mirror in her special outfit full of thoughts of how fat and awful she looks. However, this time she decides to use a mindful approach. She observes and describes her thoughts: 'I am having a thought that I look fat, I am having a thought that I look awful'. She tries to utilise a non-judgemental approach when looking at herself and knows that if she avoids this situation it will maintain her anxieties about going out on a date. She rates her anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10; it is a 9. She decides to face her fears and orders a taxi. When she arrives at the bar where she is meeting Ben, she notices her mind is full of judgements and her anxiety increases to 10. However, as the date progresses, she checks in on her anxiety and notices that it is going down; it moves to a 7 and then by the end of the date it has reduced to a 5. Anna is really pleased that she faced her anxieties, and arranges to see Ben again.

As you can see from this example, overcoming avoidance of negative emotional states means we need to *both*:

- ⊙ confront what we've been avoiding;
- ⊙ become aware of our negative thoughts, judgements or beliefs and either tolerate them mindfully or challenge them.

## Exercise

1. Rate your anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10.
2. Wearing minimal clothing, look in a full-length mirror with an open and aware mind and heart.
3. Rate your anxiety again on a 1 to 10 scale.
4. Holding the two thought and judgement cards, one in either hand, try to verbalise any thoughts or judgements that come into your mind, holding up whichever card seems to correspond.
5. If you have persistent critical judgements, try to use the non-judgemental stance card.
6. If you struggle, think about the non-judgemental stance line. Where might your thought go on that line?
7. Just doing 'observe and describe' without judging is often difficult for most body parts other than the face. You can try to make brief observations, e.g. my thighs are curved, or you may need to make radically accepting statements such as 'This is my stomach. This is how it is.'
8. Rate your anxiety again. It is really important to stay with the exercise until your anxiety has reduced sufficiently for the exposure to be beneficial.