
S5C5. Interoceptive exposure

When you are anxious, how do you know? You know it through some physical sensations in the body. You may have breathlessness, palpitations, chest pain, choking, dizziness, tingling feelings, hot/cold flushes, sweating, faintness, and/or trembling (Clark, 1986). When you are anxious, you feel these somatic sensations but when you feel these sensations, you are not necessarily anxious. These sensations can be the result of other actions in the body too.

For example, dizziness may be a symptom of spinning on a revolving chair for a minute. Or racing heartbeat and sweating may be the result of jogging. It is possible to induce these feelings voluntarily often enough and get habituated to them. So, when you do feel anxious and start experiencing these somatic sensations, you are better able to handle them. That is interoceptive exposure. It is the practice of inducing somatic sensations that mimic anxiety often enough to get desensitized to them.

Interoceptive exposures while highly effective are not recommended for everyone. If you suffer from epilepsy or seizures, cardiac conditions, asthma or lung problems, neck or back problems, or if you are pregnant, interoceptive exposures may not be right for you. You should check with your doctor if these exercises will be right for you.

Interoceptive exposures do tend to induce discomfort and hence when they are done, like any other exposure, there may be the tendency to avoid the discomfort. But, avoidance of discomfort will only serve to strengthen the fear and not deal with it. You will need to do these exercises over and over for them to work for you.

There are recommended times for each exposure and if you do interoceptive exposure, you should try to do the exposure for the recommended amount of time. Stopping sooner will be considered as avoidance. You should also focus on the sensations you experience without trying to distract yourself or do any other compulsion.

Worksheet 18 lists down the kind of exposures you can do to practice interoceptive exposures, along with the time for which each exposure needs to be done. There is also a space for recording your interoceptive exposures. Like all other exposures, set time aside for doing these exposures and record your progress. The greater number of times you do it, the better you will get at handling it.

In the next chapter, we shall look at what a correct exposure should look like.

To-Do:

Try the interoceptive exposures in WS18