

Anxiety and Phobia Desensitization

Construct phobic or anxiety hierarchy – images of increasing anxiety.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Imagery Exercise

- Relax, Using Relaxation Procedure – 10 minutes
- Create a pleasant, safe imagery – 1 minute (use as many sensations as possible to create this safe place)
- Now place the first phobic/anxious scenario into the safe and pleasant image.
- Move back and forth from the safe and pleasant imagery without the phobic/anxious scenario to the safe and pleasant imagery with the phobic/anxious scenario until the anxiety is reduced.
- Now, return to your safe, pleasant imagery. Enjoy it for a few moments before moving on.
- Now move to your next phobic/anxious scenario. Move back and forth from the safe and pleasant imagery without the phobic/anxious scenario to the safe and pleasant imagery with the phobic/anxious scenario until the anxiety is significantly reduced.
- Now, return to your safe, pleasant imagery. Enjoy it for a few moments before moving on.
- Now move to your next phobic/anxious scenario. Move back and forth from the safe and pleasant imagery without the phobic/anxious scenario to the safe and pleasant imagery with the phobic/anxious scenario until the anxiety is significantly reduced.
- Continue until you experience calmness with your previously most intense phobic/anxious scenario.

How to Get the Most out of Imagery Desensitization

The process of desensitization will work best if you adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Spend about 15 – 20 minutes the first time you practice imagery desensitization. As you gain skill in relaxation and visualization, you can lengthen your sessions. In this time period, you can expect to master two or three scenes on a good day.
2. You need to be very relaxed for this to be effective. If you think that you aren't deeply relaxed, then you might spend more time on the Relaxation Procedure before beginning the imagery. You may also choose to spend more time in your imagery. Make sure that you fully recover from any anxiety after each exposure.
3. You need to be able to visualize each phobic scene as well as each peaceful scene in as much detail as possible. If you are having difficulty with the visualization, you may ask the following questions to intensify the experience.
 - a. What objects or people are in the scene?
 - b. What colors do you see?
 - c. How is the light?
 - d. What sounds can you hear?
 - e. Can you hear or feel a breeze?
 - f. What is the temperature?
 - g. What are you wearing?
 - h. Can you smell or taste anything?
 - i. What other physical sensations are you aware of?

- j. What are you emotions?
- 4. Stop a session if you feel bored.
- 5. Try to practice every day.
- 6. Even if the first few scenes in your hierarchy don't really elicit anxiety, it is important to expose yourself to each of them at least once. Imagery desensitization is at work even when you are not feeling any anxiety in response to a given scene because you are still associating relaxation with your anxiety/phobia.