EXP Quest   Team 1

Project Team Members

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Executive Summary

EXP Quest -> A gamified app designed to push you forward on your journey to overcome social anxiety through interactive quests and challenges.

Unlike traditional apps that offer only passive advice or CBT-based prompts, EXP Quest actively guides users to practice exposure in safe, incremental steps.

Unique features/benefits:
- Interactive quests that encourage real-life social engagement. Examples Include:
    - Taking a walk through a park (Level 1)
    - Visiting a local library (Level 2)
    - Spending a day at a mall (Level 3)

- Reward system to reinforce progress.

- A fun, game-like approach to exposure therapy that makes personal growth motivating.

Market Research and Need Justification

What is social anxiety? According to a 2019 study, 4% of the population (or 300 million!) have general anxiety.[1] Social anxiety specifically is defined by the DSM[2] as fear or anxiety about social interactions, from things as small as making eye contact to bigger things like conversing with a stranger or public speaking. There is no one cause, but there are risk factors like genetics, self-image issues, or a bad experience in the past. People with this anxiety often avoid social situations because it makes them uncomfortable. Human connection is a large and lovely part of life, so our app aims to reduce, or even eliminate, this fear of social interaction. Untreated, social anxiety creeps into every part of an affected person's life. The same problems that cause social anxiety are perpetuated by it. Effects include, but are not limited to, low self-esteem, poor social skills, bad academic/work performance, and hypersensitivity to criticism.[3] Important to note here, even with therapy and CBT techniques, only 50% of people with social anxiety experience complete remission of their fears.[4] Therapy is considered effective when there is a significant decrease in the fear, but it is not required for the patient to be 'cured.' Our app accommodates for this by allowing users to beat their anxiety monster in a final battle when they feel they have conquered it, but it does not force the user to do so. Some people battle with anxiety for years, others can overcome it in a few months with therapy, some never do. We acknowledge the difference in our users, and even offer targeted quests based on their anxieties.

Regarding the effectiveness of anti-anxiety apps, there are a number of studies to speak to their pros and cons. A 2022 study[5] analyzed anti-anxiety apps and interviewed users. They noted that a majority of people who use mental health improvement apps are women, which was reflected by their participant pool. Users report keeping a mental health app because they've noticed an improvement in their daily lives or because it becomes a routine. Users deleted an app if they didn't see an improvement in their life or because of the cost. Due to the lack of focus on exposure therapy for social anxiety, there are not many competitor apps, and therefore a severe lack of research for these apps.
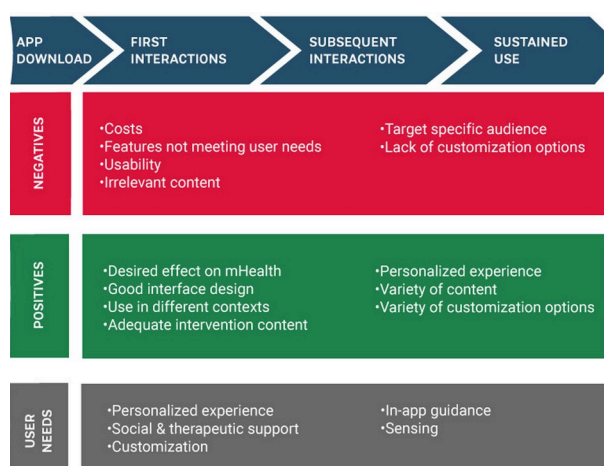
Positive and negative experiences with MHapps.[5]

A core principle of CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, is the idea that psychological problems are partly based on learned habits of harmful behavior.[6] Exposure therapy is a type of CBT, which means it shares this principle, and focuses on breaking these bad habits. Our app builds directly off of exposure therapy treatments with effective, practiced results. Level 1 quests are purely positive, asking the user to treat themselves with no feared stimuli involved.

It then slowly advances to more public settings, while still rooted in the positivity that the app began with. It encourages users not to stray from the app or run from it prematurely. EXP Quests encourages users to continue, but they do have the freedom to stop using our app at any time if it gets overwhelming. The same applies for when they are ready to return, the app welcomes them back, and eases them into it. We understand that overcoming anxiety is stressful.
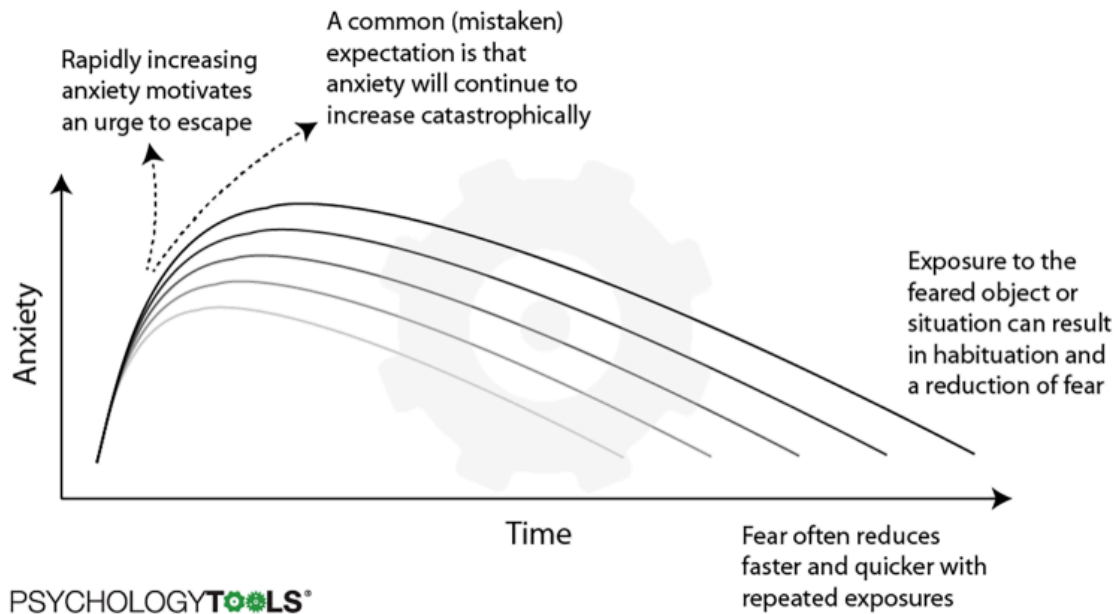
The traditional habituation graph.[7]

Among all other anxieties, social anxiety is the most common in people who play video games.[8] Gaming can relieve some of the stress caused by social interaction, and, in a way, replace normal interactions. Online communication feels easier and safer than going out and talking to friends face-to-face. There is research to support that video games are used as a crutch for people with anxiety, especially if they rely on them too much. Our app keeps a healthy balance of therapy techniques and familiar game mechanics to provide comfort in familiarity. They get a game, but have to seek out their own social interactions through the quests given.

Exposure therapy with virtual reality technology shows that gamifying therapy is an effective approach. EXP Quest does not utilize VR, instead urging its users to actually socialize with others. Overcoming social anxiety through exposure therapy is a bit different from conquering other fears, since conversations flow more comfortably if they are natural, and build genuine experience for the user. The technology is different, but the execution is the same.[9] We gradually expose our users to feared situations, while allowing them to adjust before advancing to the next stage.

EXP Quest can take all of this information to create an experience that draws users in. Unlike other anti-anxiety apps, EXP Quest is heavily focused on exposure therapy. The simplicity of daily quests is easily integrated into a users life by not being too overwhelming. This is a free app, eliminating the stress of needing to balance expenses. Users will also be able to review completed quests, allowing them to visualize the progress they've made with the app.

Product Description

Game Mechanics

- Quest System
  - Quests are divided into levels (e.g. Level 1, Level 2, Level 3).
  - Players unlock higher-level quests by completing a set number of lower-level ones (e.g. 10 successful completions of level 1 quests).
  - Each quest contributes to weekly progression and final battle eligibility.
  - Players can miss quests by not entering the app or failing to complete them.

- Final Battle Unlocking
  - Final battle against the monster unlocks after milestone completions across quest levels.
  - Milestones are defined by a set number of successful completions per level. (e.g. Milestone 1: Complete 50 level one quests; Milestone 2: Complete 35 level two quests; etc.)
  - Each milestone being completed is equivalent to the weakness stage of the monster. What this means is, the monster starts out with strength level 4, when a milestone is completed the monster weakens to strength level 3, so on and so forth.
  - When the monster reaches strength level 1 (which occurs after all milestones have been completed), the final battle is unlocked and can be initiated whenever the user is ready.

- Villager Satisfaction Bar
  - Each villager has a satisfaction bar that fills as quests are completed (e.g. 12 quests/week for full satisfaction).
  - Full satisfaction yields rewards (e.g. accessories, unlocking new villagers).

- Villager Cap
  - Maximum of 12 villagers; users start with 5.

User Progression

- Quest Difficulty Progression
    - Starts with Level 1 quests. Level 2 and Level 3 quests become available after completing a threshold number of Level 1 quests.
        - Level 1: Solo quests (that tie into the higher levels later)
        - Level 2: Public places (library, park, walk, etc)
        - Level 3: Social environments (mall, wherever else)
            - e.g. Level 1: Treat yourself! get your favorite drink from the fridge!
            - e.g. Level 2: The villagers need a restock! go to the store and buy your favorite drink!

- Villager Growth
    - Full satisfaction allows a villager to "grow stronger" which in turn will make the monster weaker.
    - Strengthening villagers results in bonuses (e.g. new accessories or additional villagers).


Narrative & Worldbuilding

- Villager Integration
    - Monster affects villagers (e.g. steals food, causes damage).
    - Villagers generate quests based on their needs or the monster's actions.
        - Example: "Monster ate my food – take me out to lunch."

- Villager Personalities
    - Weekly villagers appear with a unique personality and dialogue.
    - Returning users are greeted with custom quotes (e.g. "You're back! We missed you.").

- Village Map
    - Villagers can be seen interacting on a small map on the home screen for entertainment and immersion.

UI/UX Design

- Quest Interface
  - Clicking a quest can trigger smart suggestions (e.g. recommending local restaurants).

- Satisfaction Bar Display
  - Visual bar showing current villager satisfaction for the week.

- Welcome Back Messaging
  - Friendly, engaging and encouraging messages from villagers when users return after inactivity.
- Accessibility:
  - In the settings, there will be an option to use the app in a different language.
  - In the settings there will also be the option to put the app in dark mode or light mode (thus changing the color palette to a lighter hue or darker hue).
  - There will be an option to use the in-app text-to-speech.

Some mock-ups:
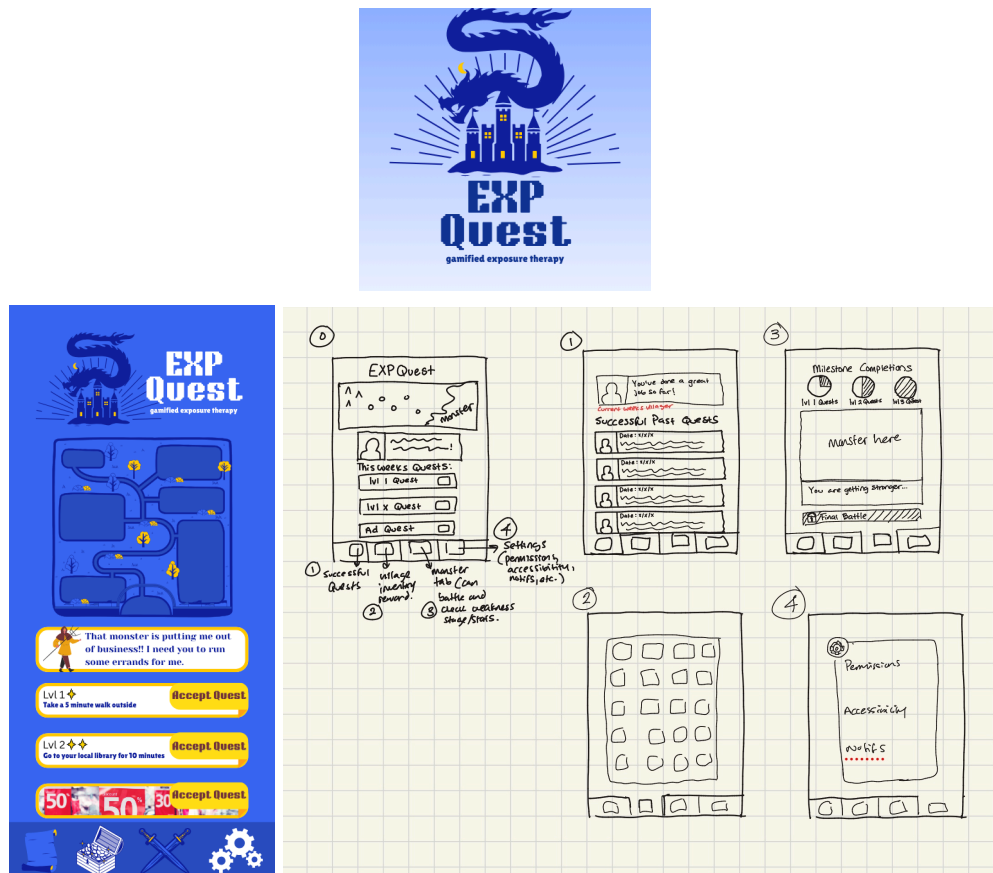
Monetization

- Ad Integration
  - Dedicated banner slot within the quest list for non-intrusive advertisements.

- Ad Removal Option
  - Users can pay to remove ads completely via a one-time or subscription payment.

- Free-to-Use
  - App remains free to promote accessibility and fun without financial burden.

- Sponsorships
  - Will explore sponsorship models for monetization (e.g. partner food spots, wellness brands, etc.).
- Data Sales
  - We will sell location data in order to maintain a steady stream of income not reliant on ads and sponsor deals.

User Retention & Engagement

- Daily/Weekly Quest Rotation
  - A new villager appears weekly with their own themed quests.

- Reward System
  - Users are rewarded with in-game items, accessories, or new characters.

- Friendly Re-engagement
  - Casual, fun reminders from villagers help re-engage users without pressure.

Possible Issues and Counterarguments

- Are there any apps out there that already do what EXP Quest would do?
  - There is one app that focuses on exposure therapy like EXP Quest would, and the name of that app is FACING IT[1]. However, this app has not been updated in three years, and was more focused on conversations regarding exposure you are committing to yourself, rather than encouraging you to expose yourself through daily tasks and challenges.
- What if the person using the app doesn't commit themselves to completing tasks/using it in general?
  - In order to allow for people not to get overwhelmed, the severity of the tasks start off small, and will progressively get more "social" as time goes on. If the user decides that they don't want to do any of the tasks and not visit the app, we can probably make push notifications in order to try and keep them going. However, that choice is ultimately up to the person using the app, and there's not much we can do.
- Privacy issues
  - With all of the tasks the app will give, there are some valid privacy concerns regarding the user. The EULA will have all of these concerns towards the top of the form, and will address the fact that no data will be kept by us, and that the permissions to use this app are purely to make the tasks work.
- How are we making money out of this?
  - Ads, sponsors, donations, and data sales. Throughout its tenure, we will accept donations within the app. We will also utilize the location services and sell that data in order to maintain a steady stream of money towards the company.
- How will the app confirm that the user completes tasks that aren't based on location?
  - The app is a merit-based system, so people will just have to trust themselves to actually do it
- What if people lie about doing the tasks?
  - Then they are doing a disservice to themselves

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social anxiety is a common challenge that affects millions of people around the globe, hindering their ability to connect with others, grow personally, and build confidence. Traditional methods can often seem overwhelming or out of reach, leaving many individuals without effective tools to achieve real progress.

EXP Quest fills this gap by providing a gamified, supportive, and motivating platform by turning the exposure therapy into a fun interactive quest starring the user as its hero. Through the integration of psychology and game design, the intimidating challenge of confronting social anxiety is transformed into a journey of personal growth, courage, and accomplishment.

Ultimately, players defeat the game's monster, symbolizing the conquering of their fears, with their little friends encouraging them along the way.

With the goal of guiding its users through overcoming their social anxiety and with the mission of fostering stronger, connected communities, we recommend going forward with EXP Quest.

Appendix

Market Research:
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3. "Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia) - Symptoms and Causes." Mayo Clinic, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/social-anxiety-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353561
4. Vriends N, Bolt OC, Kunz SM. "Social anxiety disorder, a lifelong disorder? A review of the spontaneous remission and its predictors." Acta Psychiatr Scand. (2014). https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24506164/
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6. "What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?" American Psychological Association. (2017) https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral
7. Whalley, M. "Delivering More Effective Exposure Therapy In CBT." Psychology Tools. (2019). https://www.psychologytools.com/articles/delivering-more-effective-exposure-therapy-in-cbt
8. Peterson, T. "The Relationship Between Video Games and Anxiety." HealthyPlace. (2021). https://www.healthyplace.com/addictions/gaming-disorder/the-relationship-between-video-games-and-anxiety
9. Cheng C, Ebrahimi OV. "Gamification: a Novel Approach to Mental Health Promotion." Curr Psychiatry. (2023). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10654169/

Critiques:

1. FACING IT, social anxiety app