

Unified Protocol for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders: Workbook (2 edn)

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Putting It Into Practice—Emotion Exposures

Chapter: (p. 125) Putting It Into Practice—Emotion Exposures

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Goals



- To understand the purpose of *Emotion Exposures*
- To learn how to design effective *Emotion Exposure* exercises
- To develop an *Emotion Exposure* hierarchy
- To repeatedly practice confronting strong emotions through *Emotion Exposure* exercises

Homework Review



Did you complete your **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (and your **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotion Scales** if you've chosen to complete them) for the previous week? Have you plotted your scores on your **Progress Record**? Have you noted any changes in your responses? In the last chapter, we practiced experiencing physical sensations that are most

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distressing to you. Did you practice these exercises repeatedly? If not, we urge you to spend the next few days trying them. It's important to do these exercises repeatedly so you can get used to them.

Key Concepts



The main focus of this chapter is to begin practicing *Emotion Exposures*. During this part of treatment, you'll be asked to tackle specific situations and activities that bring up uncomfortable emotions. There are two important (p. 126) reasons why you should complete *Emotion Exposures*. First, the most direct way to test out your negative beliefs about your emotions (and the situations that produce them) is to face them and see what happens. If you're avoiding going to social gatherings because you think you won't find anything to talk about, this is a way to test that out. Second, *Emotion Exposures* provide a chance to put the skills you've been learning to practice and to gain confidence that you can tolerate any strong emotions that might come up. Deliberately bringing up strong emotions may sound frightening, but you can do this at your own pace and we'll take it one step at a time. This is really the pinnacle of treatment where we put everything together, so we've placed it on the top floor of our house (see Figure 11.1). It is very important that you commit to making time and effort during this last part of treatment, because this is the chance for the greatest change to occur.

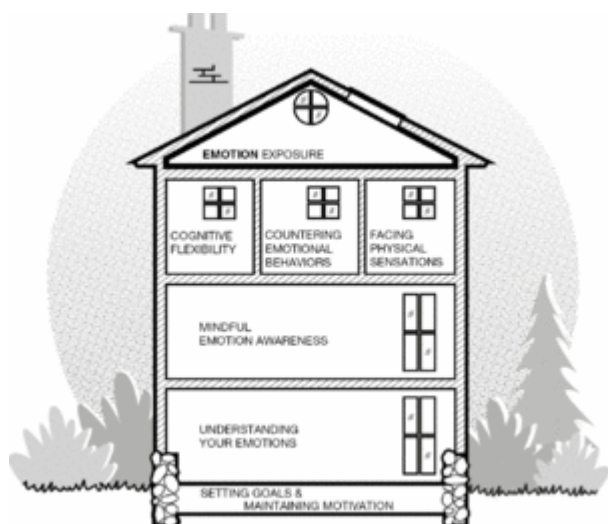


Figure 11.1

Introduction to Emotion Exposures



So far in this treatment you've learned to pay attention to the three components of an emotion using *Mindful Emotion Awareness*. You've also learned skills to respond differently to each of these components—thoughts (*Practicing Cognitive Flexibility*), behaviors (*Countering Emotional Behaviors*), (p. 127) and physical sensations (*Confronting Physical Sensations*). This next phase of treatment is the most important step for building upon the skills you've been working on. During *Emotion Exposures* we will ask you repeatedly face situations/activities that bring up strong emotions. This will provide an opportunity to practice your skills in the context that matters most—when you're actually feeling an intense emotion. Think of it this way: Can you imagine learning how to ride a bike by reading a book or having someone tell you how to do it? This would be very difficult. Unless you put it all together while actually *on* the bike, you will

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never really know how to ride. The same thing applies here. You must practice the skills we have talked about in response to strong emotions in order to truly learn how to use them.

The way we get you out “on the bike” in treatment is through *Emotion Exposures*. As we have described, *Emotion Exposures* are exercises that are specifically designed (by you) to provoke strong emotional responses—the same emotions you’ve been avoiding. We’ve provided you with all the skills you’ll need to face your emotions, you provide the final ingredient—willingness to step outside your comfort zone.

In addition to providing a valuable way to practice the skills you’ve been learning, *Emotion Exposures* also allow you to confront your negative reactions to emotions head on. In order to evaluate any negative beliefs you have about emotions (e.g., they’ll last forever, you’ll lose control), you need to actually face them to see what happens. For example, if you are afraid you’ll go crazy if you have a panic attack and you avoid situations that might trigger an attack, you’ll never be able to see that your feared outcome doesn’t occur. As a result, you’ll continue to believe that you’ll do something out of control if you panic. Similarly, if you always check your stove before going out because you think you’ll worry about your house burning down all day if you don’t, you won’t be able to test whether this constant worry really happens (or whether your house actually burns down). *Emotion Exposures* can help you test out your beliefs about emotions. Facing strong emotions will give you the opportunity to learn

1. that any uncomfortable emotions you feel are temporary. Even without engaging in any avoidance, your negative emotions will eventually subside.
2. that you can cope with negative emotions better than you thought.
3. that you can perform tasks and activities that are important to you even when experiencing strong emotions.

(p. 128) Types of Emotion Exposures



There are a number of different ways to conduct *Emotion Exposures*. In fact, any situation or activity that brings up strong emotions will allow you to practice your skills and help you test your beliefs about emotions. Keep in mind that what constitutes an effective *Emotion Exposure* depends on the person doing it—you need to face the situations that bring up strong emotions for you. We next describe the different kinds of exposure exercises.

Situation-Based Emotion Exposures

As the name suggests, situation-based *Emotion Exposures* are when you enter *situations* that will bring on intense emotions for you. Depending on your symptoms, these situations might include revisiting the location of a traumatic experience, putting yourself in an enclosed place for a period of time, or having a conversation with a stranger. Other ideas include making a mistake, getting started on a task even though you don’t feel motivated, touching something dirty, or giving a speech. You can also face situations that bring up positive emotions like getting together with friends or exercising. Exposure to positive emotions is particularly important if you avoid such situations because you’re afraid you’ll feel even worse when the experience is over or because you’re distressed that you don’t feel your positive emotions as strongly as you think you should. Look back at your **List of Emotional Behaviors Form** from Chapter 9 to help you generate ideas for situation-based *Emotion Exposures*.

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Imaginal Emotion Exposures

You can also conduct *Emotion Exposures* by imagining difficult situations. Imaginal *Emotion Exposures* are particularly useful in three instances:

1. when there are practical barriers to conducting repeated situational *Emotion Exposures* (e.g., taking multiple flights).
2. when you believe that simply thinking about a particular topic (e.g., memories, worries) will cause your emotion to spiral out of control.
3. when you believe that thinking about a particular topic (e.g., a loved getting into an accident) makes it more likely to come true.

Imaginal *Emotion Exposures* are best conducted in a quiet setting, with your eyes closed. You then picture the scene (the memory or future fear) (p. 129) in as much detail as possible, while noticing any thoughts or physical sensations the exercise brings up. Sometimes it can be helpful to write out the scenario first and then record yourself reading it so you can concentrate on imagining the scenario as clearly as you can. Remember, the goal is still to bring on strong emotions, so try to fully experience whatever comes up when you imagine your situation.

Physical Sensation Emotion Exposures

You may also choose to continue to conduct the physical sensation exposures you completed in the previous chapter. You can add the exercises that bring on bodily sensations to both situational and imaginal exposures to *really* show yourself that you can tolerate your emotions. For example, if you are nervous about participating in groups, you might first run in place to elevate your heart rate and then speak up at a meeting at work.

Practicing Emotion Exposures



You may be starting to feel a bit nervous as you think about completing *Emotion Exposures*. That's completely normal, as we're asking you to face situations that you may have been avoiding for a long time. Because we know that *Emotion Exposures* can be difficult, we will start slowly by asking you to make an **Emotion Exposure Hierarchy**. A hierarchy is a list of the situations/activities that you will face, rated by the amount of distress and avoidance they produce. You will then work your way through each of these tasks in turn. You don't need to go in order from easiest to hardest—in fact, we encourage you to mix up the order. Remember that the purpose of these exercises is to elicit strong, uncomfortable emotions. Try to begin with an exposure that you believe will evoke at least a moderate degree of emotion. Additionally, if the opportunity arises to complete a task that you hadn't planned to complete until later, go ahead and take it! For example, even if attending a party was something you had planned to do after practicing other social interactions, you should make an effort to attend any parties that you're invited to. See pp. 180–181 of Appendix B for examples of completed **Emotion Exposure Hierarchy Forms**.

Tips For Building Your Emotion Exposure Hierarchy

- If possible, plan exposures to take place in a variety of different situations (e.g., at home, at work, in public, alone, and with (p. 130) others). This can help the lessons you learn about coping with emotions really stick.
- Try combining more than one *Emotion Exposure* in the same task. For example, if feeling jittery and talking to strangers both make you anxious, you might include “drink a large cup of coffee, then introduce myself to a new coworker.” Before conducting combination exposures such as this one, it can be helpful first to practice each part of the task on its own

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—so you might get used to drinking coffee and also practice meeting strangers separately before combining the two.

■ You can make your hierarchy longer than eight items or create a new hierarchy after you complete the tasks on your initial hierarchy. You can make copies of this form or download more from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets.

Use the **Record of Emotion Exposure Practice Form** at the end of the chapter to record your *Emotion Exposures*. Again, it may be helpful to make multiple copies of this form (or download them from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets) as you will want to complete a new one for each exposure you complete. This form will walk you through how you can use all of the skills presented during this treatment while conducting these exposures. Can you use your breath to anchor yourself in the present? Can you do a quick three-point check of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? Try simply naming your emotions without attempting to change them. Can you identify automatic thoughts? Make a prediction about what might happen as a result of the exposure (so you can see whether it comes true). Are you noticing any urges to avoid? Can you replace avoidance behaviors with alternative actions? After you complete each exposure, reflect on what you learned. Two examples of the **Record of Emotion Exposure Practice Forms** can be viewed in Appendix B (pages 182–185).

Key Things to Remember about Exposure Practice



1. Practice, practice, practice! You should try to set up several exposures in a week. The more you can do, the better. It may take a couple times (p. 131) facing the same situation before you begin to feel more comfortable. After all, you are probably working against many experiences in your history where you did *not* face the situation—so it makes sense that it will take a while to develop a habit of facing these situations and to feel at ease doing so.

2. You might experience a setback. Sometimes when you complete an exposure, you might find the emotions too difficult to experience and stop the exposure early. Try not to get too discouraged—self-compassion is key here. You have a lot of practice avoiding your emotions, and it may take time to break that pattern. If you escape from the situation, give yourself a moment, and then get back in there. If you need to move a step down on the hierarchy, or change the exposure to make it a little easier, go ahead.

It is also possible the things you worry about during an exposure will actually happen—you may have a panic attack, feel very awkward in a social setting, and so forth. We don't consider that a bad thing. In fact, having occasional experiences where an exposure does not go as well as you would want it to actually leads to more lasting progress in the long run.

3. Make it part of your routine. Since exposures can sometimes be difficult to arrange, and if properly designed should evoke uncomfortable emotions, it's very common to put them off. Scheduling exposures and putting them in your planner is a good way to assist you in completing these exercises.

4. Avoid avoidance. When conducting *Emotion Exposures*, it's important to try to connect with the emotion and to “avoid avoiding.” It can be helpful to think ahead about the most likely emotional behaviors you'll have the urge to engage in and plan what you will do instead. Even the attitude with which you approach the task itself can be important. Are you conducting your exposures with reluctance, white-knuckling it through the experience and wishing it was over? Or are you welcoming your own distress with courage and acceptance? Treat each exposure as an opportunity to learn that your emotions are not as uncomfortable or problematic as you previously thought.

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Note

*A note on motivation: In Chapter 4, we discussed the importance of staying motivated to complete this program. Starting Emotion Exposures means you're in the home-stretch now, and it is really important that you finish strong. It is important to keep in mind, though, that Emotion Exposure can be really difficult – we're asking you to face situation, activities, and memories that you may have been avoiding for a long time. If you're having mixed feelings about leaping into these practices, pull out your **Decisional Balance Form** from Chapter 4. You can remind yourself of all the reasons you started this treatment in the first place and that these pros of changing outweighed the costs (like facing your emotions head-on). Use your reasons for changing to motivate you to complete these exercises.*

Treatment Goal Check-In

Use the space below to reflect on how using *Emotion Exposures* can bring you closer to the goals you set in Chapter 4. Also note any progress you've made toward your goals.

Summary



In this chapter, you have had the opportunity to take all the skills you have learned in this program and apply them to your real-life situations. This is the best way to learn any new skill. The best approach is *learning by doing*, and *Emotion Exposures* allow you to do just that.

(p. 133) Homework



- Complete your **Emotional Exposure Hierarchy**. Generate a list of at least eight distressing situations. Choose situations that will help you achieve your treatment goals.
- Practice engaging in *Emotion Exposures*. Keep track of your experience on the **Record of Emotion Exposure Practice Form**.
- Continue monitoring your weekly experiences using the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as the **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**, if you're using them).
- Remember to use the **Progress Record** to record the total scores from the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**).

Self-Assessment Quiz



Answer each of the following by circling true (T) or false (F). Answers can be found in Appendix A.

1. *Emotion Exposures* are exercises that are specifically designed to provoke strong emotional responses.
T F
2. It is unlikely that negative automatic thoughts about emotions are modified as a result of *Emotion Exposures*.
T F

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3. During an *Emotion Exposure*, it is important to identify emotional behaviors so that these behaviors can be modified.

T F

4. Maintaining control over emotions during exposures is a good strategy for gradually and systematically easing into emotionally provoking situations.

T F

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(p. 135)

(p. 136)