

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

David H. Barlow, Todd J. Farchione, Shannon Sauer-Zavala, Heather Murray Latin, Kristen K. Ellard, Jacqueline R. Bullis, Kate H. Bentley, Hannah T. Boettcher, and Clair Cassiello-Robbins

### Previous Edition (1 ed.)

Publisher: Oxford University Press  
Print ISBN-13: 9780190686017  
DOI: 10.1093/med-psych/  
9780190686017.001.0001

Print Publication Date: Nov 2017  
Published online: Jan 2018

## Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

**Chapter:** (p. 111) Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

### Author(s):

David H. Barlow, Shannon Sauer-Zavala, Todd J. Farchione, Heather Murray Latin, Kristen K. Ellard, Jacqueline R. Bullis, Kate H. Bentley, Hannah T. Boettcher, and Clair Cassiello-Robbins

**DOI:** 10.1093/med-psych/9780190686017.003.0010

### Goals



- To identify physical sensations associated with your emotions
- To understand how physical sensations impact your experience of emotions
- To confront uncomfortable physical sensations through physical exercises

### Homework Review



Before you start this chapter, let's review your homework from Chapter 9. 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**? Were you able to use any *Alternative Actions* this past week? Did you notice any effect that changing your behaviors had on your emotional

# Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

experience? Did you find any opportunities to use skills from previous chapters, like *Anchoring in the Present* or *Practicing Cognitive Flexibility*? It is best to continue to use skills from each chapter in the workbook as they work together to address all aspects of your emotional experience. If you have stopped doing your homework between chapters, remember that practice is extremely important to this program. Doing your homework lets you track your progress, and it helps you get better faster. (p. 112)

## Key Concepts



The final room on the third floor of the house we're building explores the role physical sensations play in emotional experiences (see Figure 10.1). Physical sensations refer to any physical symptoms that you might experience during strong emotions (e.g., racing heart, sweating, or nausea). Look back at one of the **Three-Component Model of Emotions Forms** you filled out when you learned about understanding emotions in Chapter 5. Consider how the "physical sensations" part of your emotions played a role in the whole emotional experience. Just like *how we think* and *how we behave* in a situation can influence our emotional experience, so can *how we feel physically*. In fact, bothersome physical sensations are often a big part of the reason people want to avoid their emotions. But, as you'll learn in this chapter, trying to get away from physical sensations doesn't really work—you just end up having more physical symptoms over time. The solution is actually to get comfortable having *more* physical sensations. We do this by practicing exercises that get you used to feeling the physical sensations associated with your emotions so that they begin to feel more manageable.

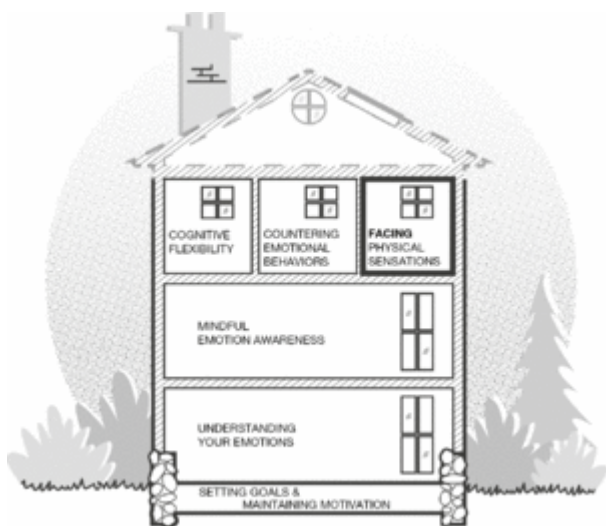


Figure 10.1

## (p. 113) Why Are Physical Sensations So Important for Our Emotional Experiences?



So far, this treatment has zeroed in on two parts of an emotional experience—thoughts and behaviors. As you know from Chapter 5, there is one more component to explore—how you feel in your body. Most emotions also have physical sensations associated with them. For example, anxiety can be accompanied by a racing heart, shortness of breath, feeling dizzy or disoriented, muscle tension, tightness in the chest, and sweating. Feeling down or depressed is associated with extreme tiredness, a lump in the throat, or heaviness in our limbs. Anger can lead to muscle

# Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

tension and feeling hot. Guilt or shame may produce stomach discomfort or flushing of the face. These physical responses are a normal part of feeling these emotions—the experience of these sensations is what alerts us to what our emotions are trying to communicate, as well as what motivates us to action.

Physical sensations can intensify your emotional experiences in a number of ways. First, they can make you feel like you can't cope with the situation you're facing. For example, you might feel like you can't get work done when you're feeling tense or that you'll never make it through a presentation if you're short of breath. Further, intense physical sensations can make you feel like something bad is about to occur. For example, some people worry that a faster heart rate will definitely turn into a full-blown panic attack. Others worry that their physical reactions will be noticeable to others—that people will be able to tell that they're nervous if they blush or sweat. Sometimes people think that if they feel tense or hot when angry, they're more likely to lose control. Others view stomach distress as a sign that their fears are valid—thoughts that a loved one may get in accident *feel* more true when accompanied by nausea.

Given that physical sensations can intensify emotional experiences, it is no surprise that they contribute to the urge to avoid emotions that we discussed in the previous chapter. But remember that trying to escape from strong emotions tends to backfire in the long run. That's what happens with physical sensations too. If you try to avoid having certain physical sensations (or the situations that make you feel these sensations), they will seem more overwhelming over time. Again, this is because avoiding something teaches you that you can't cope with it.

## Context Affects How We Interpret Physical Sensations



The context in which physical sensations occur is very important for how we interpret them. To illustrate this point, let's consider the example of children (p. 114) having fun at a playground. When a child goes down a slide, his stomach might drop and he might feel lightheaded when he lands at the bottom. What about merry-go-rounds on playgrounds? Their whole purpose is to make kids dizzy—so dizzy they can't stand up when they get off (that's the "best" part, if you're a kid). What about playing tag? This can bring on a racing heart, sweatiness, and shortness of breath—all from running around so much. When these physical feelings occur in a child on the playground, they are considered *good* sensations—something kids purposely bring on!

But consider this: these are the very *same* sensations that can feel so scary and threatening in a different context—like, as an adult, giving a speech or entering a situation that scares you. This means that the physical sensations themselves are not the problem—instead, it is your *interpretation* of these sensations that makes them so scary and uncomfortable. We take these physical sensations as evidence that something bad will happen. So if you're someone who has panic attacks, you may view your heart rate speeding up as a sign that a full-blown panic attack is on its way. Or if you're someone who gets nervous in social situations, feeling hot and sweaty might mean that other people can see that you're anxious and will judge you for it. So the context really colors your interpretation of your physical sensations. At the same time, in isolation, physical sensations don't *have* to be bad or threatening. As we mentioned, physical sensations are a normal, integral part of emotional experiences. Instead, it is your *interpretation* of physical feelings that makes them feel that way.

## Facing Physical Sensations Makes Them Easier to Tolerate



Here's the good news: your interpretation of physical sensations is something that can be changed. In fact, you can actually become more comfortable with these feelings over time. We will do this using physical exercises designed to bring on the very same sensations that

# Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

---

come up when you have strong emotions. We will ask you to practice experiencing these sensations again and again, without doing anything to make them go away. Just like you practiced present-focused nonjudgmental awareness in Chapter 7, you will practice using this same *Mindful Emotion Awareness* to observe your physical sensations without judgment.

We do this for several reasons:

- First, we do this so that you can notice what a physical sensation feels like on its own, apart from any interpretation of what it might (p. 115) mean. Often, when people explore these sensations nonjudgmentally and with a focus on what they're actually feeling in the present moment (versus what they might feel in the future), the sensations don't seem as bad.
- Next, by repeatedly bringing on these sensations, you will learn about your ability to cope with them, even when you don't do anything to manage them.
- And finally, the more you practice feeling these sensations, the more you will get used to them. They might even start to feel routine to you—even boring!

The idea is that, when these sensations come along with a strong emotion in the real world, you will know that they are safe and tolerable, even if they are uncomfortable. That way, having physical sensations come up during an emotional experience will no longer make your emotions feel even harder to handle. You can think about the exercises in this chapter like getting a vaccine. In order for your body to know how to cope with an illness, your immune system has to have some exposure to it. That's what a vaccine is—a small dose of the illness your body needs practice handling. These exercises work similarly: by exposing yourself to the physical sensations that make you uncomfortable, you'll learn that you can cope with these feelings and they will feel more tolerable the next time they come up unexpectedly.

## If You Don't Really Notice Physical Sensations and They Don't Really Bother You

Some people aren't bothered by the physical sensations that come with emotional experiences. They may even have a hard time describing any physical sensations at all. Even if you aren't aware of your own physical sensations that happen when you experience strong emotions, they are still contributing to the intensity of your emotional experiences. You can think of physical sensations as “setting the stage” for how you think and act in emotional situations. You may be less likely to fall into thinking traps if you are calm, but you may think entirely differently about the same situation if you are feeling shaky, or heavy, or agitated. Additionally, physical sensations can contribute to the urgency you feel to engage in behaviors designed to push away emotions quickly. Thus it is important to become aware of your physical sensations in a mindful (nonjudgmental and present-focused) way, just as you did for your thoughts and behaviors.

### (p. 116) Inducing Physical Sensations



As mentioned, we have designed a number of physical exercises that are meant to produce physical sensations consistent with what you feel when you're experiencing strong emotions. Your first task is to figure out which of these exercises produces physical sensations that feel most similar to what you feel in your body when you're anxious, sad, angry, and so forth. The best exercises to practice are the ones that feel the most similar to your emotions and are at least somewhat distressing to you. It is important to note that the exercises listed here are safe for most people; however, some of them may not be appropriate for individuals with certain medical conditions (e.g., hyperventilation is not recommended for people with asthma, running in place may not be suitable right after knee surgery). Fortunately, almost everyone can find at least one exercise that is safe and useful for them (e.g., straw breathing is often used by people

# Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

with asthma). If you are in doubt about any of the exercises, consult with your therapist or medical doctor before continuing.

Form 10.1 contains a list of four exercises that bring on sensations commonly associated with strong emotions. In order to conduct these exercises, you will need a stopwatch or timer as well as a thin straw (a coffee stirrer will work). Try each of the exercises below *for 60 seconds without stopping*. After each exercise, use the **Physical Sensation Test** (at the end of Form 10.1) to make a note of the physical sensations you experienced. You will also be asked to rate the level of distress you experienced during the exercise on a 0–10 scale (0 = *no distress*, 5 = *moderate distress*, 10 = *extreme distress*). Finally, you will also rate the similarity to symptoms you experience during strong emotions on a 0–10 scale (0 = *not at all similar to my emotions*, 5 = *moderately similar*, 10 = *extremely similar*). Wait until the symptoms have mostly subsided before attempting the next exercise. Use the other spaces provided to be creative and come up with additional exercises that are specific to you.

While you're completing these exercises, notice how your thoughts influence the intensity of the experience. Notice also how you behave in response to this exercise. Are you sitting back relaxed? Are you sitting forward in your chair, gripping the armrests? Are you fidgeting? Notice how different thoughts and different behaviors influence the intensity of the physical sensations you experience when engaging with these exercises. (p. 117)

(p. 118)

When you are done, put a star next to the exercises that produced distress and similarity ratings of at least 5. If none of the exercises brought on sensations that feel similar and distressing, try doing the exercises again—this time for two full minutes. Or you might try combining two exercises, such as spinning in a chair for one minute followed immediately by breathing through a straw for one minute. Finally, you can come up with other exercises to try to reproduce the physical feelings you have during strong emotions. Try each for at least 60 seconds, and record your experience in the “Other” section of the form.

## Other Physical Exercises to Try

- *To raise your heart rate:* Squats, push-ups, walking up and down stairs
- *To feel hot and sweaty:* Burpees (start by doing a push-up then jump your feet between your hands and hop to standing. Next, bring your hands back down next to your feet and jump back to push-up position. Repeat). Sit in front of a space heater, and/or put on a heavy coat indoors
- *To feel dizzy:* Roll your head from side to side, or sit with your head between your legs and then raise your head rapidly
- *To feel disoriented:* Look into a mirror with your face just a few inches away, or stare at a bright lamp or pattern (e.g., window blinds) and then look away suddenly
- *To feel shaky:* Hold books or weights straight out to the sides of your body until your arms start to shake, or hold a plank position until your body starts to shake
- *To feel heavy or tired:* Wear wrist weights, ankle weights, or a heavy backpack while going about daily activities for five minutes
- *To feel nauseous or full:* Drink a large quantity of water and wear a tight belt

## Repeatedly Confronting Physical Sensations



Once you find one or more exercises that reproduce the physical sensations associated with *your* strong emotions, the next step is to practice doing these exercises over and over again, for at least 60 seconds at (p. 119) a time. You can do this using **Form 10.2 Physical Sensation Practice**. Over many practices, you will notice that the sensations start to feel less distressing as you become more used to them. See Appendix B (p. 179) for an example of how this form can be completed.

Remember that the point of these exercises is to bring on physical sensations, so be sure to jump “feet first” into them. Doing the exercises half-heartedly or “tip-toeing” through them by using emotion-driven behaviors will not be helpful—in fact, that would just teach you that the exercises are scary! Instead, just watch what happens to your physical sensations over time, even when you don’t do anything to make them go away. You will find that the sensations eventually decrease or become less distressing on their own.

As you do each exercise, consider what is making you anxious or distressed when you’re doing it. Often what makes these exercises difficult is our expectations about what will happen if we experience sensations we are used to avoiding. For example, some people worry that they will pass out, go crazy, or have a full-blown panic attack if they try to bring on physical sensations purposefully. Think about what outcome might be worrying you. Then, when you do the exercise, see whether it actually happens. Once you have done the exercise many times, try reevaluating your predictions about what happens when you have intense physical sensations. You can use your *Practicing Cognitive Flexibility* skill to generate new, flexible thinking patterns about your experience of physical sensations. For example, you might initially have the thought “I’m going to pass out if I hyperventilate on purpose” and then, after trying this exercise repeatedly, you might generate an alternative thought “I feel anxious when I hyperventilate on purpose, but it is unlikely that I’ll pass out.”

Do the exercises over and over again, without taking breaks—only pause long enough to make ratings on **Form 10.2 Physical Sensation Practice**. Keep doing the exercises until you no longer feel very concerned that doing the exercises will have the negative consequences you initially worried about. It’s likely that by doing the exercises repeatedly, your distress ratings will also decrease. Another rule of thumb is to continue doing the exercises until your distress reaches a 3 or less. This may not happen the first time you do a set of exercises, so come back to them another day to practice some more.

### (p. 120) What Do You Do if You Don’t Find These Exercises Distressing?

To make sure you get the full benefit of the exercises, make sure you do them for a full minute—or longer—if you’re not distressed yet. You may have the urge to stop before experiencing significant sensations, possibly because the exercise makes you uncomfortable. This is exactly when it’s important to continue doing the exercise! Feeling uncomfortable, and continuing anyway, teaches you that you’re able to handle the experiences that you’ve avoided in the past. If your distress never reaches above a 3, do anything you can to make the exercise harder. This can include combining two exercises, doing them in front of other people, or doing the exercises when you already feel anxious or upset.

Some people don’t experience distress when doing these exercises in a “safe” environment, such as at home or with a friend or family member nearby. Try doing the exercises alone, outside of the house, or right before you’re going to leave the house. Even if you are not distressed by any of the physical exercises, some people find it helpful to use this as an opportunity to practice



# Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

*Mindful Emotion Awareness.* Practice “watching” your physical sensations change over the course of the exercise and labeling these changes nonjudgmentally (e.g., “I’m noticing my heart speeding up”). You can also practice noticing thoughts that come up during the exercises, possibly as a result of the changes in your body (e.g., “I’m having the worry that I won’t have enough oxygen if I keep breathing through this straw”). Also practice noticing behaviors, or urges to do something, and label these nonjudgmentally too (e.g., “I keep looking at the clock” or “I’m noticing the urge to stop the exercise”).

## Treatment Goal Check-In

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

## (p. 121) Summary



In this chapter, we explored the role of physical sensations in emotions. We highlighted how physical sensations are often a big part of why emotions are uncomfortable. We also talked about how your *interpretation* of physical sensations determines how distressing they are. Just as avoiding emotions causes them to continue over the long term, avoiding physical sensations ensures that you continue to find them distressing. The solution is to get more practice experiencing the physical sensations that are most distressing to you, without doing anything to manage or get away from them. By repeatedly experiencing these physical sensations, you start to get used to them and eventually find them less distressing (even boring).

You now have all of the core skills to begin approaching, accepting, and tolerating uncomfortable emotional experiences. You have learned how to observe your emotions, to be more flexible in your thinking, to counter emotional behaviors, and now to get used to uncomfortable physical sensations. In the next chapter, all of these skills will be brought together and you will have the opportunity to apply them to your real-life experiences.

## Homework



- Continue doing the physical exercises on a daily basis and recording your progress on the **Form 10.2 Physical Sensation Practice** at the end of this chapter. If needed, you can make copies of this form or download more from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets.
- 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**).

## (p. 122) Self-Assessment Quiz



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

1. Physical sensations may make you feel like your emotions, or emotional situations, are more threatening than they really are.

T      F

## Understanding and Confronting Physical Sensations

---

2. It is important to be aware of how we *physically feel* during an emotional experience, just as it is important to recognize what we *think* and what we *do*.

T    F

3. When experiencing physical sensations during an emotional experience, you should try to reduce their intensity so that you can get your emotions under control.

T    F

4. Confronting physical sensations repeatedly can help you learn that they are not dangerous and that they will decrease on their own.

T    F

(p. 123)

(p. 124)