

PE Homework: Session 1

Patient ID: _____

Date: _____

Check the box as you complete each item. Write any comments, questions, or problems in the space at the bottom of the form.

- ☐ Practice calm breathing for 10 minutes, three times a day.
(Use a recording at first, then begin to practice on your own.)

Day 1

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Day 2

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Day 3

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Day 4

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Day 5

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Day 6

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Day 7

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- ☐ Read “A Rationale for Treatment” and note any questions that come up.
- ☐ Listen to the recording of the therapy session one time.
- ☐ Come early to the next session to complete self-report forms.

Other:

Rationale for Prolonged Exposure (PE) Treatment

How is PE Helpful in Reducing PTSD Symptoms?

The program you are about to begin is called Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE). It is designed to help you recover from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To understand how this treatment works to help you reduce your PTSD symptoms, it is important to learn a little about how PTSD develops in the first place.

It is normal to feel upset or distressed after a trauma.

When someone experiences a traumatic event, it is normal to feel upset or distressed. These feelings of distress -- whether anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, or other emotions -- will usually lessen with time. Eventually, most people will begin to feel better. However, for some people, the distressing feelings do not go away and can sometimes begin to interfere with everyday life. Why do some people develop PTSD after a trauma while others do not?

Avoiding those feelings prevents recovery.

One important reason for the development of PTSD is avoidance. After the trauma, you may push away memories, thoughts, or feelings about the trauma that cause you distress. You may also avoid situations, people, or activities because they are similar to the trauma and/or because they seem more dangerous to you than before the trauma.

It is important for you to know that this is a normal response to trauma. It is not your fault. It is not due to lack of intelligence, poor motivation, or some character flaw. We avoid -- all of us, from time to time -- because it works for us! Avoidance can be a reasonable and helpful way to deal with distress -- in the short term. Unfortunately, if avoidance is your main strategy, you miss out on opportunities that could help you process your emotions and begin to recover from the trauma. Most importantly, avoidance can make the problem much worse in the long run.

It's kind of like falling off a bicycle when you were a kid. If you get back on, you eventually master the bike, and you feel less afraid of falling. If instead, you refuse to get back on the bike and try again, the bicycle can start to seem very dangerous, and you become more and more afraid and avoidant of it over time. You might also feel more and more ashamed or embarrassed that you haven't learned to ride when your friends have already learned. Just thinking about the bicycle becomes distressing.

Thinking the worst about yourself & others makes recovery more difficult.

A second factor that keeps PTSD going are the unhelpful thoughts that go along with the trauma and your reactions to it. Many people with PTSD believe the world is a pretty dangerous and unpredictable place, and they have very little confidence in their own ability to manage difficult or distressing situations. You can see how beliefs like that encourage more avoidance and keep you from taking on experiences that might help you look at things differently. Those beliefs increase your distress and keep you from processing and getting past the trauma. Eventually, avoidance and unhelpful beliefs can creep into other areas of your life and interfere with things that are not even related to the original trauma.

Treatment will help you face your feelings and thoughts.

In this treatment program, you will begin to approach those trauma-related thoughts, feelings, activities, and situations instead of avoiding them. You will learn two new strategies to help you. The first is called in vivo exposure. In vivo means “in life”. When you do in vivo exposure, you gradually begin engaging those relatively safe situations that you have been avoiding in your life since the trauma. The second is imaginal exposure, in which you revisit the trauma repeatedly in your mind while saying what happened aloud.

It gets easier with time and practice.

Imaginal and in vivo exposure both work in similar ways. Basically, these strategies help you confront or approach your distressing emotions, under relatively safe circumstances. As you practice these strategies over and over again, you begin to learn that your distress gradually decreases. In other words, you can become more comfortable in those situations, and you begin see that the distress doesn’t last forever. We call this habituation. Habituation is a natural process that occurs when we stay in a distressing experience rather than escaping it or avoiding it.

When you begin approaching instead of avoiding, you begin to organize and process the memory and the emotions that go with it. This will eventually make the memory less likely to pop up all the time and help you to feel more comfortable when you are sometimes reminded of it. This will also allow you to feel more in control because the memories are less likely to pop up at times when you don’t want them to. As you repeatedly revisit the trauma in therapy, the flashbacks, nightmares, and unwanted thoughts will be less likely to bother you. With time, you may even come to see the trauma differently.

By approaching instead of avoiding, you also begin to see that the situations you avoid and the memories you try to push away are not dangerous. You don’t actually need to avoid them. Doing the things you need to do, in and out of therapy, can become easier over time, as your urge to avoid decreases.

You can begin to feel and think differently.

As you work your way through your avoidance, you get a chance to check those unhelpful thoughts, too. You experience firsthand how you are able to make effective choices and take care of yourself without falling apart or losing control, even if you are distressed or upset. With the benefit of those experiences, you will be able to challenge unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, bring your thinking more in line with what you are learning, and let go of inaccurate or unhelpful ideas that are holding you back and preventing your recovery.

You can recover and move forward in your life.

This treatment will be challenging, and some people feel nervous or doubtful in the beginning. The urge to escape and avoid can be very strong. But with time and practice, you will find that in vivo and imaginal exposure help reduce the urge to avoid. This will allow you to organize and process your experiences so that you can recover from the trauma, regain your confidence, and move forward with the things you need and want to do in life.

Relaxed Breathing

How is Relaxed Breathing Helpful?

Your emotions affect your breathing and heart rate, and your heart rate and breathing affect your emotions. Stressful feelings signal your body to be on the alert and speed up your breathing and heart rate. Increases in heart rate and breathing can further activate anxious thoughts and feelings, which can make you feel more stressed or on edge. Once these feelings arise, it can sometimes be difficult to get out of the cycle.

Calm or controlled breathing helps to slow down your heart rate and breathing, interrupting the stress response cycle and ratcheting down your stress reaction. With practice, this will help you feel less anxious and/or better able to tolerate stressful situations.

The steps:

- 1) Inhale normally through your nose with mouth closed.
- 2) Exhale slowly with your mouth closed
- 3) As you exhale, count slowly to 4
- 4) Pause for a count of 4
- 5) Take the next inhalation.
- 6) Practice this exercise several times a day
- 7) 10 to 15 cycles of breath at each practice

Helpful Tips:

- Space your practice throughout the day rather than saving it all for evening or bedtime. Though the exercise may help you fall asleep, it is really designed to help you feel better while you are awake!
- If you feel a little lightheaded, slow down.
- Some people find it helpful to have a calming word like PEACE or RELAX to focus on as they breathe. If this works for you, feel free to try it.
- Don't worry if you don't notice immediate effects from the exercise; it takes practice to develop the habit.
- Once you become familiar with the exercise, it is easy to practice on the spot while you are waiting in a line or doing some other routine activity. No one will be the wiser, and you can reap the benefits.