

CBT Tip of the Week, from Dr. Lee Rosen, Ph.D.

Exposure!

In CBT, the central intervention for anxiety is exposure. This means, move *toward* that which makes you anxious. It's kind of a do-the-opposite strategy. Assuming that the thing your anxious about is not genuinely dangerous – spiders of the non-venomous type, homework, presenting cases in small groups, assertive communication, stuff like that – “behavior therapy” pretty much entails strategizing and coaching to systematically move toward those scary stimuli and practice that skill over and over. In CBT, our response to “that makes me nervous, scared, or uncomfortable” is, then let's do that (again assuming no actual danger)!

By extension, many of us develop an automatic fear of certain emotions, like sadness. In the [Unified Protocol](#), one of CBT's go-to treatment manuals, there is a module all about facing difficult emotions. That means creating assignments, on purpose, in a gradual fashion, to create difficult emotions. Think about what you're afraid of, especially that which blocking you from moving toward your goals. Create a hierarchy, starting with the most mildly threatening version (a picture of a cartoon spider, presenting a patient to only two friendly people, etc.). Practice moving toward the items at the low end. Move up gradually, move up and down your hierarchy. An important principle here: your values and goals are calling the shots, not your anxiety. Recruit a friend to help you. Practice, as repetition creates mastery. Notably, this skill sometimes requires the help of a therapist. And that's ok, too.

As always in CBT, practice and repetition are key.