

Exposure Examples: “Internal Cue Exposure” for Panic Disorder



Internal cue exposure means that the trigger for our anxiety is internal, or inside our bodies. This type of exposure is used most often for people that struggle with Panic Disorder. Anyone who has had a panic attack knows how uncomfortable it is; this is the “fight or flight” response at its worst! Often the “trigger” for panic attacks is body symptoms and feelings. Remember what we discussed in the “Anxiety Fuel” section? Uncomfortable body feelings can lead to worries about further anxiety symptoms, which then triggers more symptoms, which leads to more worries, and before we know it we are in the middle of a full-fledged panic attack.

Because the trigger for panic attacks within the context of Panic Disorder is *the body*, the exposure exercises center on the anxiety symptoms themselves. If we can become comfortable with the idea of having the anxiety symptoms, we train the brain that the anxiety is not really dangerous, and the anxiety “alarm” doesn’t need to be sounded as loudly or as often. These are also called **interoceptive exposure** exercises, which is a fancy way to say exposure to feelings of anxiety and panic in the body.

Take a look at these interoceptive exposure exercises that can be used to toughen up against the possibility of having a panic attack. The person would pick a symptom that they experience when they have panic and practice one exercise daily. Each person may not respond to each exercise, so it is important try a number of them and find one that will trigger some anxiety.

Symptom: Rapid heartbeat

-Run on the spot or up and down stairs for 1 minute, then 1 minute break. Do this sequence 8 times.

Symptom: Breathlessness or smothering feelings

-Hold breath for 30 seconds, then breathe normally for 30 seconds. Do this 15 times.

-Breathe through a narrow, small straw (plug nose if necessary) for 2 minutes, then 1 minute breathe normally. Do this 5 times.

-Sit with head covered by a heavy coat or blanket.

Symptom: Choking feelings, gag reflex

-Place a tongue depressor on the back of the tongue (a few seconds or until inducing a gag reflex). Do this repetitively for 15 minutes.

Symptom: Trembling or shaking

-Tense all the muscles in the body or hold a push-up position for as long as possible for 60 seconds, then rest 60 seconds. Repeat 8 times.

Symptom: Sweating

-Sit in a hot, stuffy room (or sauna, hot car, small room with a space heater)

-Drink a hot drink

Symptom: Dizziness or lightheadedness

-Spin slowly in a swivel chair for 1 minute, then 1 minute break. Do this sequence 8 times.

-Shake head from side-to-side for 30 seconds, then 30 second break. Do this 15 times.

-While sitting, bend over and place head between legs for 30 seconds, then sit up quickly. Do this 15 times.

-Hyperventilate (shallow breathing at a rate of 100-120 breaths per minute) for 1 minute, then normal breathing for 1 minute. Do this 8 times.

Symptom: Derealization (feeling that things are not real)

-Stare at a light on the ceiling for 1 minute, then try to read for 1 minute. Repeat 8 times.

-Stare at self in a mirror for three minutes, then one minute break. Repeat three times.

-Stare at a small dot (the size of a dime) posted on the wall for three minutes.

-Stare at an optical illusion (rotating spiral, “psychedelic” rotating screen saver, etc.) for two minutes, then break for one minute. Repeat five times.

Symptom: Tightness in throat

-Wear a tie, turtleneck shirt, or scarf tightly around the neck for 5 minutes, then take a one minute break. Do this three times.

Exposure Examples: “Internal Cue Exposure,” continued

Let’s see what a course of interoceptive exposure for panic would look like. Janet is a 24 year-old woman with Panic Disorder. She has panic attacks that seem to come from “out of nowhere” and she often worries about having another panic attack. Sometimes she feels a little anxious and she begins to feel dizzy, which then makes her worry the panic will get worse; in fact, it usually does.

Step One: Pick a trigger

Janet decides to start with the “dizziness” trigger, because it most often triggers panicky thoughts that fuel the anxiety and make it worse.



Step Two: Create a fear hierarchy

Janet lists the different interoceptive exercises she can use to trigger some anxiety, using a list she got from her therapist.

Exposure exercise (different ways to trigger the anxiety)

- Spin in a swivel chair for 1 minute, then 1 minute break. Do this sequence 8 times.
- Shake head from side to side for 30 seconds, then 30 second break. Do this 15 times.
- While sitting, bend over and place head between legs for 30 seconds, then sit up quickly. Do this 15 times.
- Hyperventilate (shallow breathing at a rate of 100-120 breaths per minute) for 1 minute, then normal breathing for 1 minute. Do this 8 times.



Step Six: Ending exposure

Janet continues to practice the exposure for about 10 weeks, changing the exposure exercise about each week as she moves up the hierarchy. This, with a combination of external cue exposure and cognitive skills, improves her panic symptoms and makes her feel confident that she can manage a panic attack in the future.



Step Three: Rate the hierarchy

Janet rates each potential exercise using the SUDS scale (see “Exposure, Getting Started,” for more information on the SUDS).

<u>Exposure exercise</u>	<u>Anxiety Rating</u>
-Spin in a swivel chair for 1 minute, then 1 minute break. Do this sequence 8 times.	7
-Shake head from side to side for 30 seconds, then 30 second break. Do this 15 times.	9
-While sitting, bend over and place head between legs for 30 seconds, then sit up quickly. Do this 15 times.	7
-Hyperventilate (shallow breathing at a rate of 100-120 breaths per minute) for 1 minute, then normal breathing for 1 minute. Do this 8 times.	5



Step Five: Middle sessions of exposure

Once Janet feels like her level of anxiety for the hyperventilation exercise has come down to around a “3” during the exercise, she moves on to the next harder exercise on the hierarchy. She continues to practice these exposure exercises daily.

She continues to move up on the hierarchy until she becomes more used to the feeling of being lightheaded and dizzy, as well as more at peace with the possibility that she will have a panic attack when she feels dizzy. Since she also becomes worried when she experiences feelings of tightness in her throat, she decided to do some of these interoceptive exercises, as well.

Along with her interoceptive exposure exercises, she added **external cue exposure** exercises (see previous page) to places that she avoided because she was worried about having a panic attack.

Along with her exposure practice, Janet and her therapist worked on some of the thoughts that tend to “fuel” the anxiety once it is triggered. We will talk more about these thoughts in the **Cognitive Therapy Skills** module of the manual, in a section entitled “The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is...”



Step Four: Starting exposure

Janet picks an item from the list in the “5-6” range on the SUDS. She begins by practicing hyperventilating for one minute, then one minute rest, alternating 8 times, which takes her about 15 minutes. She tracks her progress using the SUDS by rating her level of anxiety before, during and after the exposure. She follows the rules of exposure outlined in the section “The Exposure Formula,” and repeats this daily for one week.