

# Interoceptive Exposure

This handout aims to assist therapists in incorporating interoceptive exposure techniques into therapy sessions. Interoceptive exposure lets clients confront the distressing bodily sensations associated with anxiety, fostering a sense of control and developing willingness to engage in valued behaviors. Therapists should ensure they are familiar with the process before using it with clients, and that there are no medical contraindications to engaging in the exercises.

## Acceptance or Willingness

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- Emphasize the importance of acceptance, also known as willingness, to engagement in interoceptive exposure.
- Note that acceptance was previously addressed during psychoeducation and values exploration, to increase the client's willingness to participate in exposure work.

## Introducing Interoceptive Exposure

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### 1 Discussing Interoceptive Exposure

- Explain what interoceptive exposure entails, including its purpose and benefits.
- Address common questions and concerns about interoceptive exposure, ensuring that the client feels informed and prepared.
- Reassure the client that they are in control throughout the process, emphasizing their ability to set the pace and to stop if necessary.

- Emphasize that the therapist will ensure a safe environment for the client during exposure exercises.

## 2 Experimentation

- Frame interoceptive exposure as an experiment if the client still expresses hesitancy.
- Explain that engaging in interoceptive exposure allows them to challenge their fears and potentially achieve different outcomes.
- Ask the client if they are willing to experience discomfort in exchange for potential benefits and positive changes in their life.

## Respect Resistance

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- Acknowledge that “no” is an acceptable answer if the client remains resistant to interoceptive exposure.
- Encourage open dialogue to explore their concerns, misconceptions, and fears.
- Shift the focus to values and committed action, allowing the client to engage in less threatening activities that align with their goals.

## Interoceptive Exposure Exercises

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### 1 Starting With the Least Distressing Symptom

- Explain the importance of beginning with the symptom that causes the least distress, to build confidence and tolerance.
- Provide the example of starting with increased heart rate as the least distressing symptom.

## 2 Practicing Exercises Together

- Encourage clients to practice interoceptive exposure exercises to support their other work during sessions.
- Highlight that the exercises are doable and not necessarily scary, even if they induce temporary discomfort. Model this by doing them too.

## 3 Creating a Safe Space

- Emphasize the need for and importance of a safe therapeutic environment in which clients feel in control and supported.
- Remind the client they can end an exposure anytime if they are genuinely concerned about their immediate health.

## 4 Overcoming Discomfort

- Encourage the client to challenge their discomfort by extending the duration of exposures in small increments.
- Demonstrate to the client that they can endure intense distress yet still live according to their values.

## 5 Doing Symptom-Specific Exercises

- Give examples of interoceptive exposure exercises for specific symptoms, such as increased heart rate, dizziness and disorientation, and shortness of breath.
- Explain the exercises in detail, including instructions and safety precautions.

## Debriefing and Practice

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### 1 Debriefing

- Allocate time at the end of the session to debrief and to allow the client to calm down after the exposure exercises.
- Discuss the client's level of distress and the sensations experienced during the exercises.
- Guide the client in using their coping skills to regulate emotions and bring themselves back to a calm state.

### 2 Practice Outside Sessions

- Instruct the client to practice interoceptive exposure exercises independently at home.
- Encourage daily practice and suggest recording their experiences to monitor progress.
- Provide resources such as interoceptive exposure worksheets or online materials to support their practice.

## Key Points

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- Acceptance, or willingness, is crucial for engaging in interoceptive exposure work, allowing clients to explore values-based behaviors and achieve positive outcomes.
- Introduce interoceptive exposure gradually, starting with the least distressing symptoms and progressing to more challenging ones. Overcome discomfort by gradually extending the duration of exposure, demonstrating that anxiety and discomfort can be managed.
- Debrief with clients after each session, and encourage the independent practice of interoceptive exposure exercises to promote progress and skill development.