

weekly progress. We emphasize the importance of daily practice and of writing down your thoughts and experiences. Procrastination and skipping practice is the great enemy—another form of avoidance.

During the course of your recovery in the group, you will learn many techniques to help you deal with your phobia. Many of these will come from reading and speakers, but probably the best ones will come from the group members themselves. Be open to suggestions. If something sounds reasonable, try it. If it works, write it down and incorporate it into your behavior. Let us know about it. We want you to share the good and the bad with us. That's what we are here for!

Feel free to call upon the group members whenever you need to. Overcoming a phobia takes a lot of courage, and the fact that you've made the commitment to do something about yours is the first—and probably the most difficult—step. Welcome and good luck!

Practicing and Goal Setting

How often should I practice?

EVERY DAY. There is a direct correlation between the number of times a person practices going into the phobic situation and the amount of progress that is made. Remember, you are in a self-help program. Although attending the group meetings is a key part of your recovery, the person who is responsible for your overcoming your phobia is YOU. The more often you expose yourself to the phobic situation, the sooner you will become desensitized to it. It is easy (and tempting) to find reasons not to practice every day, but remember that if you do avoid practicing, you are only hurting yourself and prolonging your phobia. You cannot wish your phobia away nor, as you have found, can you just ignore it. You have learned a negative behavior pattern and are now being taught how to replace that with positive behavior. This, like any other learning process, takes time, practice, and effort.

How long should each practice session be?

The more time you spend in the phobic situation, the easier it will become. Your body cannot physically maintain very high levels of anxiety for a long time. No matter how anxious you feel, after a while your anxiety level will drop. It will go up and down, but the longer you stay, the more comfortable you will become. Therefore, you want to stay in the situation long enough so that you are reasonably comfortable before leaving. Each time you remain in the phobic situation, in spite of your desire to flee, you

> reinforce the idea that although your anxiety levels may fluctuate, nothing is going to happen to you.

In the most effective practice session, you are desensitizing yourself to the feelings of panic that arise in the phobic situation rather than the actual situation, per se. For example, usually people who are phobic about taking escalators fear the feelings of panic that arise when taking the escalator; they don't really think taking escalators is dangerous.

Ideally, you should spend several hours at a time in the phobic situation, but since this is not always practical, try to practice for at least one hour a day. You may have difficulty finding the time, but daily practice must be made a priority.

Where should I begin each practice session?

Start off with something easy and progress to more difficult tasks. NO STEP IS TOO SMALL. Each step leads to the next no matter how insignificant it may seem at the time.

Practicing is much easier—and you are more likely to get around to it—if you select a goal that you want to accomplish. For example, a person with driving phobia will find extra motivation for practicing driving if her “practice” trip enables her to visit a store she wanted to shop in. Try to build in a reward at the end.

Begin each practice session with a definite goal in mind. The more specific the goal, the better. After you've established your goal, break down the steps you will need to take to reach it. If the first step is too difficult, cut it in half. Take a smaller step. And if that's too difficult, cut it in half again. Remember, no step is too small.

If your goal is to go into the store and buy ten grocery items, begin by just walking into the store, picking up one item and feeling good about it. If that is too difficult, just walk in and out of the store and feel good about it. If that is too difficult, just walk up to the door of the store and try to stand there for several minutes. If you feel you cannot do that, then just get out of your car and walk within ten feet of the store. If that is too difficult, just drive into the parking lot near the store. Keep breaking down your steps until you find one that you can take. Feel good about yourself for every step forward you take. As you reach each step, wait a few seconds, take a deep breath and take one more step. If necessary, take one step back, rest a few seconds, and then go forward again. If you feel foolish about only going as far as the entrance to the store or only as far as the parking lot, think of the alternative— not doing anything at all. Take a deep breath and GO.

Keep your goals and steps simple and specific—for example, buying a specific item or items, just picking up a specific item, walking into a store and out, standing at the door for twenty seconds, taking ten steps at a time toward the store, walking until you pass three cracks in the sidewalk, and so forth. Always make sure that you are PRACTICING and not just TESTING.

What is the difference between practicing and testing?

You are PRACTICING when you have chosen a specific goal and, by breaking down the steps and using the techniques to help you stay in the situation, are able to work toward achieving that goal.

You are TESTING when you say, "I'll keep going until I have a panic attack." TESTING is not helpful because:

1. you are assuming a negative outcome before you even begin,
2. you miss out on experiencing the sense of accomplishment you feel when you reach a specific goal,
3. your focus of attention is more likely to be on future thinking than on the present, and
4. you are telling yourself that you can leave the phobic situation as soon as you feel your level rising.

Practicing and testing are different in several ways:

1. Practicing is something you do voluntarily—testing is something that is done to you or that you "must" do.
2. Practicing is something that leads to a sense of mastery and pride. Testing, at best, leads to a sense of having survived and, at worst, a sense of having failed again.
3. Practicing is something you can control in terms of when and where and what. It is desirable to practice setting goals that are a bit beyond where you feel comfortable—that way you continually push back the restraining wall of the phobia. And once you set your sights on the farther peak, the nearer ones suddenly become easy.
4. Practice leads to successes built on successes. Testing always leaves you back at square one.
5. Practicing is something you can share—with other phobic people and with your family members. You can get

encouragement and support. Testing is something that must be endured alone.

Remember, your aim in PRACTICING is to stay in the phobic situation in spite of any bad feelings you may have. You want to set your goals; stay in the present; keep your primary thought focused on simple, manageable tasks; and stay connected to reality by carefully observing what is really happening at the moment. Once you have taken that first step, no matter how small it may seem, you have made progress.

What if I get the feeling that I MUST leave?

In the past, you have found that when you leave the phobic situation, your anxiety level goes down. You are therefore tempted to leave as soon as you begin to feel uncomfortable, assuming that this is the only way to be relieved of your phobic feelings. If you remain in the phobic situation, you will find that your level will also go down, but you don't trust that yet. Each time you stay long enough to see that your anxiety level will come down without your having to leave, you reinforce the idea that nothing is going to happen to you. Intellectually, you understand this, but the only way you will really believe and trust it is to experience it for yourself. This is difficult at first, but it gets progressively easier with constant practice.

If you feel you absolutely MUST leave, try to wait out the panic and then leave. Let the feelings pass. The worst will only be a few seconds. Tell yourself that you will wait twenty seconds and then leave. If you are driving, you might say to yourself, "I'll pass one more sign or five more trees and then pull over." In the store you might say, "I'll look for one more item or ask someone one question before leaving." In a high building, you might touch three things or take two steps closer to the window before leaving. Your aim is to delay your leaving long enough for the panic to diminish. Then you may leave, rest a while, and go back. It is very important for you to go back to a place where you felt uncomfortable as soon as you can. The longer you wait to return, the more difficult it becomes. Go back STEP BY STEP, any way you can—but GO BACK!

Rules To Help You Get the Most From Your Practice Sessions

1. Choose specific goals, making sure that they are both reasonable and challenging.
2. Leave yourself enough time so that you can remain in the phobic situation long enough for your anxiety level to come down.

3. Make yourself aware of your OUTS, but do not dwell on them.
4. Keep a list of helpful techniques in your pocket.
5. Expect to feel uncomfortable.
6. Avoid leaving a situation while you are feeling panicky.
7. Confront your fears. The more you do so, the sooner they will disappear.
8. Measure your success in terms of how far you pushed yourself toward achieving your goal and by whether you managed to stay in the phobic situation in spite of any bad feelings.
9. Feel good about each step you take, no matter how small.
10. Use the task sheet on page 89 after each practice session to record your experience.
11. Deliberately do things that will raise your anxiety level so you can learn how to cope with the unpleasant feelings.
12. Remember that you are trying to learn a new attitude toward your panic feelings as opposed to trying to avoid them at all costs. Go out and meet them, deal with them, and accept them.

A good attitude for you to have during your practice sessions is expressed in a short verse by Lancelot:

Which Epitaph Shall Be Mine?

She couldn't try
For fear she'd die.
She never tried
And so she died.

She couldn't try
For fear she'd die.
But when she tried
Her fears, they died.

Confronting the Phobic Situation

What can I do when I am beginning to feel panicky?

Remember that although your feelings are very real and very frightening to you, they are not dangerous. You are not going to lose control, go crazy, make a fool of yourself, or have a heart attack. What you are experiencing is a fear of the fear.

In order to have this fear you must first think about it. Let us call this the "WHAT IF" THOUGHT. The "WHAT IF" THOUGHT is usually in the form of "What if?"—"What if I pass out? "What if I make a fool of myself? "What if I lose control of the car?" Without the "WHAT IF" THOUGHT, the fear thought will not follow.

It is therefore necessary to change the "WHAT IF" thinking as soon as it occurs. But how?

You know that if you are trying to think of two things at the same time, neither one can have 100 percent of your attention. So when you find yourself beginning to focus on what "might" happen, you want to consciously bring another thought into your mind rather than give the phobic thought your complete attention. You can do this by carrying out a simple and specific task; that is, something that demands just enough concentration to hold your attention, but is simple enough that you don't have to think a great deal about it.

The more you concentrate on doing your "task," the easier it will become for you to remain in the phobic situation. And the longer you remain exposed to the things that frighten you, the sooner you will become used to them.

Examples of simple and specific tasks are:

1. counting backwards from 100 by threes,
2. counting windows on a building, buttons on an elevator, letters on a sign, etc.,
3. asking someone a simple question—e.g., the time, directions, price, etc.,
4. repeating an encouraging phrase over and over to yourself—e.g., "These feelings have passed before and I know they will pass again,"
5. describing in detail all of the things you see around you, noticing color, size, shape, texture, and position,
6. saying the words to a song or poem,
7. making up lists,
8. writing down your thoughts,
9. watching the second hand of your watch,

10. taking three deep breaths, holding them, and letting them out slowly,
11. telling yourself that you cannot be tense and relaxed at the same time and consciously tensing and then relaxing specific parts of your body,
12. picturing a place that you would really like to be (beach, ski resort, country home, etc.) and describing the scene in detail to yourself,
13. playing simple word games—e.g., spelling words backwards, switching initials in first and last names, counting the number of letters in the words someone is saying to you, and
14. making physical contact with things around you—e.g., shuffling your feet on the floor as if you were putting out a cigarette; switching radio stations by touching all the buttons; touching a chair, tree, item of clothing; etc.

While you are carrying out your simple tasks, you may experience levels of anxiety. This is normal and should be expected. Put all of your efforts into staying with your task. Be aware that the less attention you give to your phobic thoughts and the more you remain focused on your task, the less intense the frightening feelings will become. Do not try to control or fight these feelings. Let them be while you continue to concentrate on your task.

There is a tendency to “rehearse” the bad feelings, based on past experiences or “future thinking.” When you find yourself doing this, STOP! Immediately go back to using the techniques described above to change your “WHAT IF” thinking. Your aim is to let these negative thoughts DIE OF NEGLECT.

How do I know for sure that nothing will happen to me?

By staying in the present and observing what is really happening. Ask yourself, “Am I passing out now?” “Am I out of control?” “Am I making a fool out of myself?” “Are people really looking at me?” Make yourself aware of the reality of the situation. Notice that your feet are firmly planted on the ground, that your hands are on the steering wheel, or that you are really carrying on a normal conversation. Tell yourself that you have felt these uncomfortable feelings before and nothing has happened to you. People with phobias DO NOT do the things they are afraid of doing. As close as you may think you have come in the past to losing control, remember that there is a BIG DIFFERENCE between what you “think” you will do and what you actually do. Have you ever lost control? Have you ever done any of the things you are afraid of doing when you

have had a panic attack? You won't. And the only way for you to truly believe what you know intellectually is for you to experience it yourself. Each time you expose yourself voluntarily to a phobic situation, you have the opportunity to reinforce the fact that your feelings are frightening but not dangerous.

What is the difference between a CRUTCH and an OUT?

It is helpful to give yourself an OUT before entering a phobic situation.

A CRUTCH is something you use to keep you from confronting the phobic situation: depending on someone else to do your shopping, driving on side streets instead of the highway, walking up steps to avoid using the elevator, getting drunk before getting on an airplane. These are all CRUTCHES and stand in the way of your progress.

An OUT is something that enables you to go forward and confront the situation with a greater amount of ease: noticing where the exits are in a building, knowing that your dinner partner would be willing to leave if you feel you have to, checking to see where you could pull off the road safely. Knowing that these options are available enables you to go into the phobic situation without feeling trapped. It is always helpful—and better—to give yourself an OUT, even if the OUT does not seem very appropriate. It is better to drive on the highway telling yourself that you can pull over if you want to than not to drive on it at all. If standing in a grocery line is difficult, tell yourself that if you absolutely had to, you could leave your groceries and run. If you are going to the theater and feel that you will not be able to sit through the whole performance, allow yourself the option of leaving.

Once you have established your OUT, your anxiety level will go down, you will feel less trapped, and it will be easier for you to enter and remain in the phobic situation. Although many times the OUTS may seem foolish or inappropriate, remember the worst that will happen to you is that you will feel foolish or inappropriate. SO WHAT?

It is a good idea for you to try to play out your worst fantasies about what would happen if you absolutely had to leave the phobic situation immediately. Go ahead and take an OUT. Pull off to the side of the highway and see what happens; sit down on the sidewalk; leave your packages in the grocery cart and run out of the store; walk out of the restaurant in the middle of the meal and then return; tell the bus driver you must get off immediately; ask someone a foolish question; or get up out of your seat in the middle of a performance. What is really the worst thing that will happen if you do any of these things? Nothing more than the possibility of your being embarrassed. And most likely, no one will even notice or pay any attention to you. Think of how you would react to seeing someone else in any of the above situations. You might be puzzled,

empathetic, amused, annoyed, or just indifferent, but certainly not as shocked or horrified as you think others would be if it were you. The experience of having taken an OUT while practicing will enable you to confront the phobic situation more easily the next time, since you will now know that if you must leave, the consequences will not be so terrible.
