



Needle and Blood Phobia: Applied Tension and Other Strategies

An explainer, applied tension practice card, and appointment plan · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Needle and blood fears are common and can make blood tests, vaccines, and medical care hard to face.
- This phobia is unique: many people faint because blood pressure drops suddenly.
- A technique called applied tension raises blood pressure and helps prevent fainting.

Why this phobia is different

With most fears, heart rate and blood pressure rise. With blood, injury, and injection fears, many people experience a two-step response: blood pressure first rises, then drops quickly. This can cause light-headedness, sweating, nausea, or fainting. It's called a vasovagal response.

That's why typical relaxation techniques can make things worse for this phobia. Instead, you need to raise blood pressure.

Common signs

- Avoiding blood tests, vaccines, or medical and dental care
- Feeling faint or nauseous at the sight of blood or needles
- Feeling woozy even when talking about medical procedures
- Worry about fainting in front of others

What the research says

Applied tension was developed specifically for blood and injection phobia and helps prevent fainting by raising blood pressure (Öst & Sterner, 1987).

Studies have found applied tension to be an effective treatment for blood phobia (Öst, Fellenius & Sterner, 1991).

Tool: My Applied Tension Practice Card

APPLIED TENSION (practise daily)

1. **Sit comfortably.**
2. **Tense** the muscles in your arms, legs, and torso at the same time. Hold for 10–15 seconds, until you feel warmth rising in your face.
3. **Release** and return to normal for 20–30 seconds. Don't fully relax.
4. **Repeat** five times.
5. **Practise** five times a day for a week before your appointment.

If you have high blood pressure, a heart condition, or other health concerns, check with your doctor before using applied tension. If you feel a headache, ease off the tension.

My appointment plan

Appointment and date:

What I'll tell the nurse or doctor (e.g., "I sometimes faint. Can I lie down?"):

Who could come with me:

Applied tension practice completed this week (circle): M T W T F S S

My reward afterward:

Strategies to try

- **Ask to lie down.** Lying down makes fainting much less likely.
- **Eat and drink beforehand.** Unless told to fast, have water and a snack before your appointment.
- **Look away if helpful.** Early on, it's okay to look away. With practice, you can gradually watch.
- **Build a ladder.** Pair applied tension with gradual exposure: pictures, videos, holding a needle cap, then the real procedure.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Practise applied tension daily.** Practise five times a day for a week before your appointment, so it feels automatic when you need it.
- **Tell the nurse.** Saying "I sometimes faint with needles" lets staff help, for example by having you lie down, which prevents fainting.
- **Use pictures before the real thing.** Gradually look at drawings, then photos, then videos of needles or blood while using applied tension.
- **Cough or squeeze if you feel faint.** If you notice light-headedness, tense your muscles harder, or cross your legs and squeeze. Your body responds quickly.
- **Plan a reward.** Pair the appointment with something enjoyable afterward. It helps your brain build a more positive association.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What medical care have I been avoiding because of this fear?

What do I worry will happen during a blood test or injection?

What would it mean for my health to feel more confident about needles?

Who could support me at my next appointment?

When to reach out for support

If needle or blood fear is keeping you from medical care, a therapist can guide you through applied tension and exposure, often in just a few sessions. Let your doctor know too. They are used to helping people with this fear.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Öst, L.-G., & Sterner, U. (1987). Applied tension: A specific behavioral method for treatment of blood phobia. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 25(1), 25–29.

Öst, L.-G., Fellenius, J., & Sterner, U. (1991). Applied tension, exposure in vivo, and tension-only in the treatment of blood phobia. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 29(6), 561–574.

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