

Exposure and Response Prevention

Client Handbook

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Welcome to Your ERP Journey.

At Wildflower Center for Emotional Health, we believe that healing begins with understanding — and that meaningful change is possible when we pair compassionate care with effective, evidence-based treatment. Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is a scientifically supported therapy that helps individuals facing anxiety, OCD, and related challenges reclaim their lives from the grip of fear and avoidance.

With guidance and consistency, you'll learn to face the thoughts and situations that cause distress while resisting the urge to engage in unhelpful responses. This process helps rewire the brain's alarm system and opens the door to a more flexible, joyful, and purpose-driven life.

This handbook is your companion on this journey. It will offer practical tools, psychoeducation, and encouragement to support you every step of the way. **We are honored to walk alongside you.**

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Experiential Avoidance and Anxiety

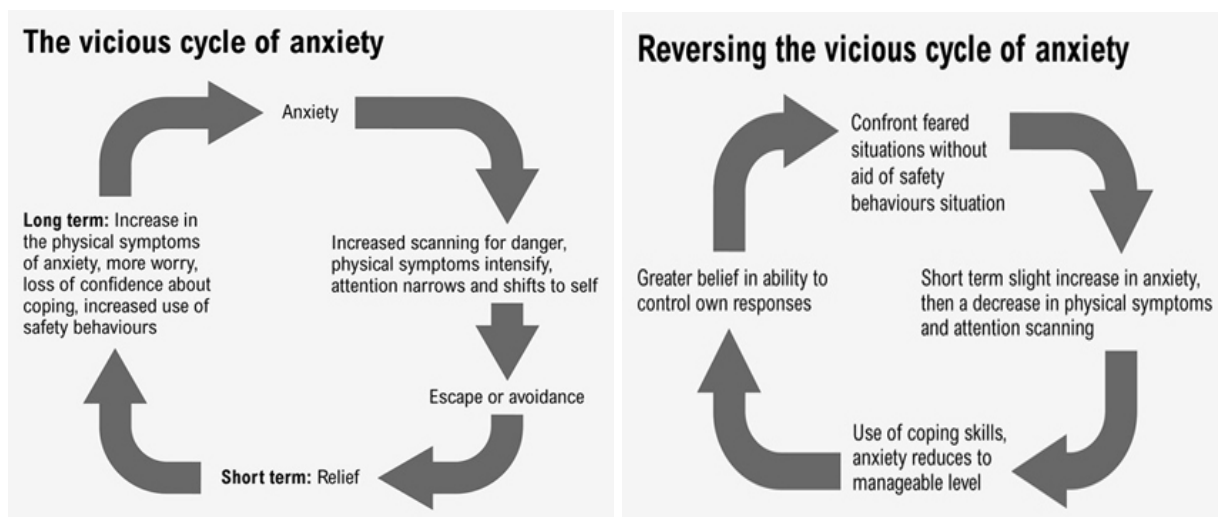
Our goal in engaging in Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) is to help you fully engage in a valued-based life, and reduce experiential avoidance. Overtime, as we experience anxiety, we may become more sensitive to the experience of anxiety for a number of reasons. As a result, we may find ourselves limiting our activities in order to avoid that feeling of distress. This can lead us to engaging in a life that is limited, and not in alignment with our values.

Poison Ivy and the Anxiety Itch

To better understand experiential avoidance and anxiety, *Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety* (2007) offers a helpful metaphor known as the “Poison Ivy and the Anxiety Itch” that can help us understand how avoiding anxiety can become problematic within our lives:

Poison ivy is a plant that produces a strong skin irritant. Most people avoid touching the plant because they know that they’ll get: a nasty, red, blistering rash that itches like hell. If you have been unlucky enough to have been exposed, then you know what this is like. You’ve got the strong urge to scratch. And when you do that, you make matters worse. You end up with open sores on your skin. And if you haven’t washed the plant oils from your hands and exposed areas, you may spread the allergic reaction to other parts of your body. No amount of scratching will cure the inflammation. You need to stop scratching and allow your body to heal itself.

The anxiety itch is like this too. The discomfort rages through your head and body, and you have a strong urge to get relief. So you avoid. You struggle. The problem is that you can’t avoid exposure to anxiety in the same way you can avoid a poison ivy plant. Anxiety can show up anytime or anywhere. When you scratch your anxiety itch with avoidance or struggle, it makes the anxiety worse – the anxiety grows and spreads to infect most of your life. And all of that avoidance scratching pulls you out of your life too.



What are Avoidance Strategies?

Think about all of the ways that you might avoid anxiety or distress. While this list certainly isn't exhaustive, some examples of avoidance strategies could include:

- Procrastinating on a challenging task because you feel overwhelmed
- Docketing a difficult conversation because you fear the outcome/response
- Canceling social plans because you are anxious about being around people
- Avoiding leaving the house because you're worried about baby's safety or fussiness
- Avoiding activities you enjoy because you don't feel like yourself

What is Exposure and Response Prevention?

ERP creates a space where you deliberately expose yourself to whatever activates your anxious thoughts or reactions by participating in an "exposure" under controlled conditions. ERP allows you to face your anxiety, and directly challenge your experiential avoidance.

Through ERP you learn to accept and sit with the distress as it naturally reduces over time, rather than engaging in avoidant behaviors that you might typically would use to avoid the distress. Over time and with repeated practice, this helps decrease the urges to engage in avoidance following an activating event, and ultimately increase your confidence that you can "survive" the distress and anxiety. This might sound scary and overwhelming, and this is where your therapist can help you learn coping skills and strategies to manage this most effectively.

Key Components of Exposure Response Prevention

Willingness. Willingness is a critical part of ERP. In order to effectively engage you need to cultivate a willingness to experience anxiety/distress and the thoughts/feelings/sensations that come about with that experience.

Willingness means "to show up, and to be open to experiencing anxiety as it is versus fighting anxiety (or avoiding it) with all you've got" (Forsythe & Eifert, 2007). An important piece to remember is that you are in charge of your exposure – nobody is ever going to force you to do something that you are not willing to experience at that moment. One of the most effective ways to cultivate willingness is to identify what values you want to work towards with your exposures. We are more willing to face and experience our anxiety/distress in the moment when we know that it is in service of a value that's important to us.

"The [lotus](#) is the most beautiful flower, whose petals open one by one. But it will only grow in the mud. In order to grow and gain wisdom, first you must have the mud --- the obstacles of life and its suffering.... The mud speaks of the common ground that humans share, no matter what our stations in life. ... Whether we have it all or we have nothing, we are all faced with the same obstacles: sadness, loss, illness, dying and death. If we are to

strive as human beings to gain more wisdom, more kindness and more compassion, we must have the intention to grow as a lotus and open each petal one by one."

- *Venerable Thupten Ngodrup*

Tracking your distress: In ERP, it will be important that you check in with yourself and about your current distress level, utilizing the Subjective Unit of Distress Scale (SUDS).

Identifying vulnerability factors: Prior to engaging in your exposure it will be important to identify what vulnerability factors may be present in your life at the moment. Some examples might include, getting a poor night's sleep, getting stuck in traffic, forgetting to eat lunch, etc. Vulnerability factors can be anything that alters your mood to not feel like your best self. If you notice you have many vulnerability factors, perhaps that means you might choose a lighter exposure for the day.

Letting your anxiety rise and fall: Within ERP, you will practice sitting with the distress and letting the anxiety run its course, letting your body come back down to baseline naturally. Think of it as riding out the wave of anxiety, or going up and down the anxiety hill. Our goal is for you to sit with and experience the thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc. without engaging in avoidance strategies.

Hierarchy format: In ERP you will practice increasing your ability to tolerate various levels of distress. One way we do this is by identifying a "target/focus area" and then utilizing a hierarchy to guide our exposure practices week to week. Your target/focus area is the area in which you want to challenge your experiential avoidance. Think of the hierarchy as a roadmap, identifying the steps needed in order to continue moving you towards your target area for the week.

There's always room for "tweaking": It will be important to reflect on how you may want to "tweak" your exposures week to week, in order to identify factors/conditions that will help make the practice as effective as possible.

Specifics: The more specific we can make the exposure, the more useful the exposure practice can be for you! Some factors may include: location, length of time / duration of exposure, with whom (e.g., number of people, gender of people, people who know you well versus people who don't know you as well, authority figures versus peers), predictable versus unpredictable experiences, imaginal versus in-vivo, etc.

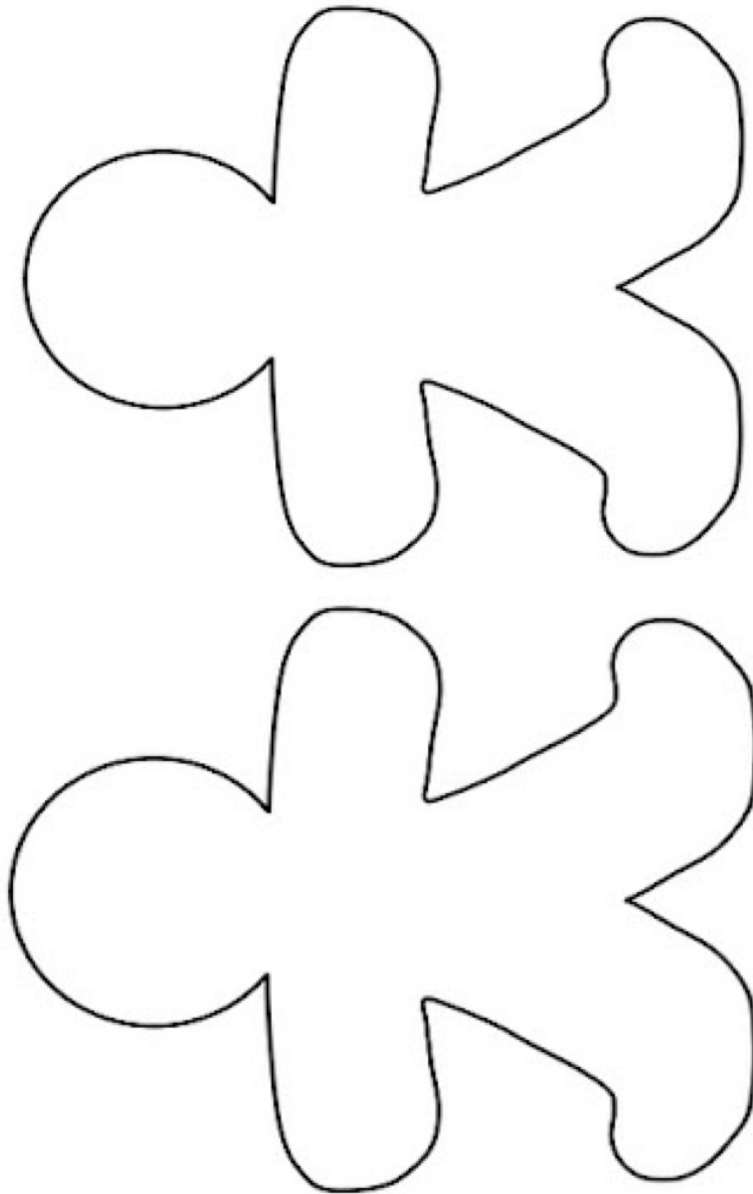
Values Cards

A helpful place to start is to identify the values that you want to work towards. You can use the following link: https://www.motivationalinterviewing.org/sites/default/files/valuescardsort_0.pdf as a launching pad. It might be helpful to think of values as our guiding light or north star that is guiding the kind of life you want to live. Your values can, and will, change over the course of your life, and that's ok! Take some time to identify your top 8-10 values using the link above. After you have identified your values, take some time to engage in the following journal prompts.

1. What values did you choose, and in your own words, what do they mean to you? Why are they important to you?
2. How do these values show up in your day-to-day life? Additionally, what is getting in the way of connecting with these values day-to-day?
3. What would a values based life look like for you? What would be signs that you are actively connecting with and prioritizing your values in your life?
4. What would be some signs that tell you that you are disconnected from your values? What would tell you it may be time to reflect and re-engage with your values?
5. What is the smallest, easiest step that you can take toward these values today? This week? This month?


Gingerbread People Exercises

Take some time to engage in a body scan to identify how you might feel anxiety in your body. It might be helpful to notice where the anxiety starts (perhaps with sweaty palms, flushed face), and track how it progresses (maybe sweaty palms and flushed face become a racing heart). As you check in with yourself on this, take some time to write or draw what you notice in your body on the gingerbread people below. You can use one gingerbread person for the front of your body, and one for the back of your body.



Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS)

Imagine you have a “distress thermometer” to measure your anxiety according to the following scale. Notice how your level of anxiety changes over time and in different situations. Identify the symptoms you experience at each level of anxiety. It may be helpful to reference your gingerbread people when completing this exercise



10	Highest anxiety/distress that you have experienced, unable to cope effectively
9	Extremely anxious/distressed, limited ability to cope effectively
8	Very anxious/distressed, coping becomes increasingly challenging
7	Quite anxious/distress, interfering with ability to cope effectively
6	Increased anxiety/distress, coping becomes more effortful
5	Moderate anxiety/distress, noticeable discomfort, able to cope with effort
4	Increased level of distress, still able to cope effectively
3	Mild anxiety/distress, able to cope effectively
2	Minimal anxiety/distress
1	Alert and awake, concentrating well
0	Totally relaxed

Four Steps to Effectively Manage Anxious Thoughts & Avoidance Urges

The following are adapted from Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz's *Brain Lock* (1996) for managing obsessive and compulsive urges as well as anxiety. These skills can be helpful anytime you're noticing anxious or distressing thoughts.

Re-label

Re-label your thoughts as thoughts. Our minds give us all kinds of thoughts and urges in a day and we do not necessarily have to act on each one. Try relabeling the thoughts as thoughts, for example: "I'm noticing I'm having the thought that..." or "My brain is having the thought that..."

Re-attribute

Re-attribute the thoughts and urges as a byproduct of anxiety. Remember that treatment is going to be a process that takes time, energy, and dedication.

Re-focus

Re-focus your energy and thoughts on alternative activities. Work around the thoughts by focusing your attention on something else when needed, at least for a few minutes. If possible, do another behavior or activity for a short time until the distress or anxiety reduces. You may not feel "calm" after this, but notice if your anxiety decreases in intensity.

Re-Value

Re-value the thoughts and urges by reminding yourself of your values in life that you are working towards to create a valued based life. When you get overwhelmed by the thoughts, take a moment to reconnect with the value that you've established. Recall why you are doing this important work.

Distress List

Spend some time identifying what your top areas of distress are currently in your life. It might be helpful to reflect on your values, and anything that might be interfering with your ability to live a valued based life. After you've identified your distress list, take some time to rate the level of distress you feel in relation to that item using the SUDS scale you built on previous pages.

Distress	SUDS Rating

Guidelines for Conducting Exposures

1. **Have exposure practices be planned, structured, and predictable.** Decide in advance what you will do in the situation and how long you will engage in the exposure. Remember, with exposures, the clock starts, and the clock ends.
2. **In order to be most effective, try to have exposure practices be repeated frequently and spaced close together.** The more closely spaced the practices, the more symptom reduction that you are likely to experience. It is a good idea to practice being in the same situation repeatedly until it becomes easier.
3. **Know that exposure pace can be gradual.** You don't need to jump into the deep end of the pool on your first go-around. Take some time to identify what feels challenging yet do-able. That is a great place to start.
4. **Expect to feel uncomfortable.** It is perfectly normal (and expected!) to feel uncomfortable during initial exposure practices. These practices may leave you feeling tired and anxious afterwards.
5. **Try to stay present in the moment.** Complete the practices without the use of distraction, leaving early, and other such strategies.
6. **Use exposure practices to test negative predictions about the consequences of facing your fear.** Before beginning an exposure, ask yourself what you are afraid might happen during the practice. Then conduct the exposure practice to test the accuracy of your fearful prediction. Afterwards, think about the evidence you gained from your experiences and how it compares to your original fearful prediction.
7. **Rate your distress on a SUDS scale of 0 to 10.** During exposure practices it can be helpful to pay attention to how you are feeling and notice the variables that make your anxiety go up and down during the practice.
8. **Have exposure practices last long enough for a significant reduction in distress.** This might mean even if you can complete the "task" of the exposure in a minute or two, you might want to take an additional handful of minutes to sit in the distress with whatever has come up for you during the practice.
9. **Have practices take place in different settings to generalize learning.** Conducting exposure practices in multiple settings will help bring about a more broad decrease in your distress. It is often helpful to conduct exposures with your therapist, at home, and in other settings. It can also be helpful to conduct some exposures by yourself because sometimes the presence of other people can make us feel artificially safe.
10. **Discuss any barriers that come up along the way with your therapist.** Each exposure is an opportunity for learning. Oftentimes once we start our exposure practice we might realize what we thought was the most distressing part no longer is, and then we might need to tweak or edit our exposure to be more effective during our next practice. Your therapist can be an invaluable resource in this exploration.
11. **Use imaginal exposures if needed.** If you are having trouble identifying how to practice your exposure in real life/in real time, talk to your therapist about imaginal exposures. These might involve journaling, role playing, visualization, etc.

Exposure Plan(s)

Now is the time to put everything we've learned together!

1. Identify one item from your distress list that you would like to create an exposure hierarchy around.
2. Identify what value working on this exposure is in service of
3. Brainstorm 1-5 potential ways to engage in an exposure surrounding your distress list item.
 - a. In general, it may be helpful to start with a lower level, more accessible exposure, and build up to something more distressing. For example, you might start with something that is a 3 or 4 out of 10 on your SUDS list, and build to something that is a 7 or an 8.
 - b. Note: If your exposure is not something you can envision doing in real time/in real life, you might explore imaginary exposures, or engage in journaling activities where you explore your avoidance and process what it might be like to engage in the avoidance in a different way. Talk to your therapist about this to learn more!

Distress List Item I am working on :

Value(s):

Exposure Plan	Estimated SUDS
Exposure 1:	
Exposure 2:	
Exposure 3:	
Exposure 4:	
Exposure 5:	

Tracking Exposure Progress

Throughout your exposure work inside and outside of the therapy space, it can be very helpful to track your exposures that you've completed to see how your progression toward your specific exposure plan is going - having data to see in real time how exposure work is progressing can be monumental in giving yourself credit around progress areas, challenging predictions about stressful situations, and building your confidence in your ability to handle distress along the way. The sheet on the following page can be used to track your exposure progress week-to-week.

Exposure Plan	Estimated SUDS	Thoughts & Predictions	Vulnerability Factors	Outcome (SUDS beginning, middle/peak, and end of exposure; thoughts and predictions accurate?)	Ways to Tweak

References

Forsyth, J., & Eifert, G. H. (2007). *Mindfulness and acceptance workbook for anxiety: A guide to breaking free from anxiety, phobias, and worry using acceptance and commitment therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Schwartz, J. (1996). *Brain lock: free yourself from obsessive-compulsive behavior*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.