



Identifying Patterns of Avoidance and Opposite Action Plans

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2/15/2024



Disclosures

- Dr. Anna Swan and Dr. Alison Libby graciously contributed materials for this presentation.
- No one involved in the planning or presentation of this activity has any relevant financial relationships with a commercial interest to disclose.
- UCSF CAPP is supported by federal and state grant funding.
 - The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sponsors part of a federal award totaling \$2,670,000 with 17% financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).
 - CAPP is also sponsored by the California Department of Health Care Services Prop 56 Behavioral Health Integration Funding, in partnership with Anthem and Blue Cross.



Objectives

1. Name 2 signs of avoidance
2. Identify 1 way that exposure can be an intervention for avoidance
3. Describe 3 examples of “opposite action” strategies for disrupting avoidance.
4. Develop opposite action plans for common avoidance patterns among students you serve.



Some facts about stress in school

- **School** is the **most common** source of stress.
- Nearly **60% of teens** and **40% of children** report time-management of all of their activities to be a source of stress.



What do students avoid?



School Avoidance

- More than just “school jitters”
 - Length of time and function of refusal are important
 - Different than truancy
- Often symptom of deeper problem
- Most common ages affected: 5-6, 10-11, or in times of transition



First steps in addressing school refusal

- Identify the function of the school refusal (avoid negative emotions, escape social evaluation, increased attention from loved ones, tangible reinforcement)
- What is anxiety-provoking at school, and how to address?
- What happens when the youth says home?
- What to do about physical symptoms/feeling sick?
- Plan to support youth's return to school

What is Anxiety?

- Fear is response to imminent threat (fight/flight)
- Anxiety is more future-oriented
 - “apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill”
- Anxiety serves very important purpose!
 - Prepare us for threats
 - Avoid danger, run away
 - Keeps us safe!
- Goal is NOT to get rid of all anxiety!
 - Is adaptive and effective... up to a point



What is Anxiety?



Avoidance refers to behaviors people use to avoid or disengage from specific situations or difficult feelings.



Reinforcement

Which behaviors are strengthened?

Positive Reinforcement

- Provide rewards to increase effective behaviors (approach)
- Shape behavior over time
- Behavioral plan targeting specific behaviors



Negative Reinforcement

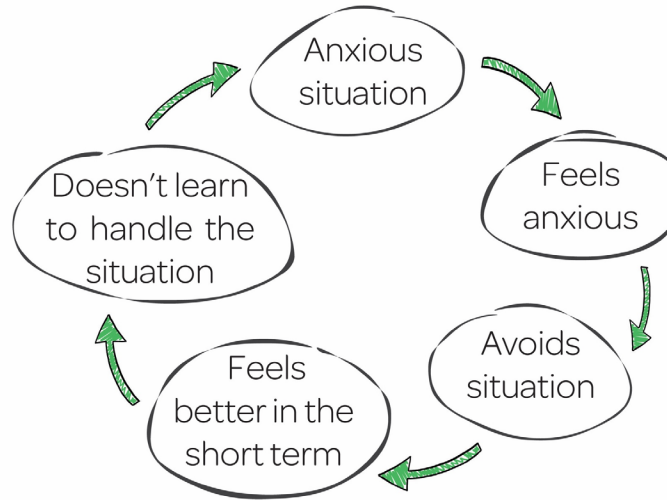
- Avoiding something stressful provides immediate **relief**
- Increases avoiding behavior and anxious thoughts/beliefs not tested
- Anxiety cycle continues
- Reassurance-seeking behavior

Be careful to not reward avoidance!

- *Fun activities at home vs going to school leads to staying home more*

How does Exposure Work?

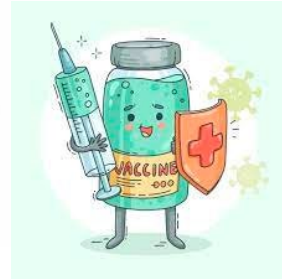
Many things cause anxiety, but avoidance maintains it.



Exposure therapy aims to stop the cycle of anxiety.



Brave practice helps kids slowly face their fears.



Exposures are the **KEY INGREDIENT** in effective CBT for youth anxiety

Why Exposure?

Builds mastery and confidence

Actually *experience* world differently

Prove anxiety/ worry thoughts wrong

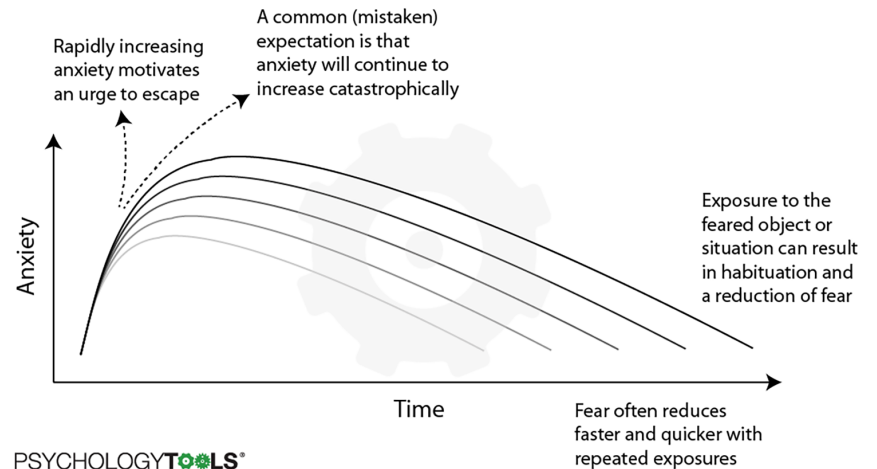
Learn that anxiety will go down

Get used to unfamiliar situations

Increases ability to tolerate uncertainty

Can be really hard for adults to do!

Resist the urge to rescue



Behavioral Strategies

Exposure

- **Approach rather than avoid!**
 - Do the “**Opposite Action**”
- Strengthen “worry management muscles”
- Develop **exposure hierarchy**
 - “Fear ladder”, “exposure ladder”
 - Rate with “fear thermometer” on 0-10 scale
- In vivo and imaginal exposure
- Approach one step at a time
 - Systematic desensitization

Avoidance Hierarchy
Construct a ladder of places or situations that you avoid. At the top of the ladder put those which make you most anxious. At the bottom of the ladder put places or situations you avoid, but which don't bother you as much. In the middle of the ladder put ones that are in-between. Give each item a rating from 0-100% according to how anxious you would feel if you had to be in that situation. Overcome your anxiety by approaching these situations, starting from the bottom of the ladder.

Situation	Anxiety (0-100%)
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Opposite Action

Anger gets us ready to attack/ It activates us to attack or defend.

Opposite show kindness/concern or walk away.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Opposite Action

Shame gets us ready to hide. It activates us to isolate.

Opposite raise your head up, give eye contact, shoulders back.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Opposite Action

Fear gets us ready to run or hide. It activates us to escape danger.

Opposite go towards, stay involved in it, build courage.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Opposite Action

Depression gets us ready to be inactive. It activates us to avoid contact.

Opposite: Get active.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Opposite Action

Disgust gets us ready to reject or distance ourselves. It activates us to avoid.

Opposite push through and get through situation.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Opposite Action

Guilt gets us ready to repair violations. It activates us to seek forgiveness.

Opposite apologize and mean what we say.

https://dbt.tools/emotional_regulation/opposite-action.php

Quick Resources

Helpful psychoeducation videos

Basic tips for managing anxiety (for kids, teens, parents):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Leyx4NpWQRo&list=PLWXu8EHZjBYpQZi9bs3XwtAssXYlwbTZV&index=27>

Basic principles of exposure therapy (for kids, teens, parents):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z-ZGt_vD5A

Physical anxiety explanation (for kids):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfSbWc3O_5M

Physical anxiety explanation (for teens):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpolpKTWrp4>

Series of videos on fighting anxiety (for teens, parents):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X53m8ajl70>

Resources for Students & Families

- [Blog post on Opposite Action with Kids](#)
- UCSF CAPP: <https://capp.ucsf.edu/patient-resources>
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org
- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: www.abct.org
- The Children's and Adult Center for OCD and Anxiety: www.worrywisekids.org
- The Child Anxiety Network: www.childanxiety.net
- Parent Training Resources: www.copingcatparents.com
- Psychology Today: www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

