# How to Recognize and Cope With Your Anxiety Triggers

by ERIC PATTERSON

## Anxiety Triggers, Avoidance and Exposure

For people who are anxious, it can feel like anxiety is constantly surrounding you. No matter where you are or who you are with, it can strike at any time without notice. What's worse is that anxiety leads you to feel powerless. You may struggle to react in a way that makes your stress better instead of worse.

### A Look at Anxiety Triggers

Anything can trigger an anxious reaction. Many anxiety triggers are appropriate — if a stranger in a dark alley is following you, you should feel anxious. If you encounter a menacing dog on your job, the same response would be expected.

In these cases, anxiety is a helpful tool to trigger your fight-or-flight response. This will help keep you safe and boost your performance, both physically and mentally.

Inappropriate triggers are common and come in two forms:

1. **When there is too much anxiety for the given situation** – Rating your anxiety a 10 out of 10 when confronted by a practice test that is not scored.
2. **When a non-threatening person, place, or thing triggers anxiety** – Having your anxiety triggered by a baby carrot or piece of loose-leaf notebook.

Triggers can be learned responses to past situations or fears developed regarding new people, places, situations and things based on indirect information or hearsay.

For example, if you were in a car wreck as a teenager, it would be expected that cars, driving, or the location of the accident would spark some anxiety. Also, it is possible to be triggered by a car accident without being in one personally if you have thought too negatively about it.

Some common triggers of anxiety include:

- Certain people associated with past problems.
- Strangers associated with fear of the unknown.
- Certain locations associated with past stress.
- New or different locations associated with fear of the unknown.
- Specific phobias, such as animals, open spaces, closed spaces, or certain foods.
- Misinterpreted messages from your body, like changes in heart rate, feeling dizzy, or being too hot or too cold.
- Behaviors that can end poorly, such as speaking in public or taking an exam.
- Thoughts spinning out of control.

### Moving to Avoidance

In the world of anxiety triggers, avoidance might be your best friend. By avoiding the people, places and things that initiate your anxiety, you can keep your anxiety at a manageable level.

For people who are terrified of penguins, Antarctica can be easily avoided. You can stay away from the certain street corner where a negative event transpired. You can avoid speaking in public by taking a job that requires only written communication. You can avoid baby carrots by closing your eyes through that section of the grocery store.

Avoidance can be a great skill, but it has its share of limitations:

- **It leads to additional problems.** If your job produces a great deal of stress, leaving it suddenly could end in a number of financial hardships.
- **It could be impossible.** Triggers can be common, so if your trigger is people with blond hair, you are going to encounter a yellow-haired person during your travels.

Avoidance is done best in small doses. When you avoid too much, your world begins to shrink as anxiety limits what you do, when you do it and who you do it with. People who find they avoid more should think about another option.

### Confronting With Exposure

When avoidance is not possible or not appropriate, exposure is a great alternative. As the name implies, exposure involves you confronting your anxiety trigger rather than staying away from it. In many ways, it is the opposite approach to avoidance.

Surely, exposure it not advisable with all anxiety triggers. If you are finding relief with avoidance, that strategy can remain. Also, if exposing yourself to the trigger will put you in serious physical or psychological danger, direct exposure is not for you.

For example, you should not let a cobra bite you or walk through an active war zone. Public speaking, leaving the house, or engaging new people does lend itself to the work of exposure though. Here's how:

- **Set your goal.** To begin your path to exposure, think about what you want to accomplish, and how you will know when your goal is achieved. Without a clear goal, you cannot track your progress.
- **Plan your steps.** The best exposures are done gradually in a step-by-step process. Here, you begin with a step that produces low amounts of anxiety before moving to a more challenging step. This allows your body and brain to get used to the trigger.
- **Practice relaxation.** Since you will be putting yourself into a stressful situation, you will need some strong relaxation skills. Practice the skills you know while searching for additional options to add to your repertoire. If your anxiety is unmanageable during exposure, you will be more likely to flee and become more triggered by that stimulus.
- **Make a move.** Armed with your relaxation skills, begin systematically exposing yourself to your stressor. Do not avoid the anxiety. You will know when the step is complete when you can stay in the uncomfortable situation with a low anxiety rating.
- **Rest and repeat.** Exposure is exhausting, so you will need some rest afterward. When you have recuperated, complete the next step to build momentum towards your goal.

### Exposure Through Imagery

There are some situations that do not lend themselves to direct exposure but cannot be avoided. These triggers could be related to past traumatic experiences, anxious thinking patterns, or various other causes. You might want to consider using guided imagery as a means of exposure if this is your situation.

With imagery exposure, you imagine you are there confronting your anxiety trigger. It can be done in much of the same way as it will follow the same peak and relief trend that other exposures do. You can even supplement imagery into your exposure steps.

When you feel anxious, anything can be a trigger of new or increased anxiety. By identifying and avoiding your triggers, you will limit their impact significantly.

For the rest, consider the process of exposing yourself to your triggers in a controlled way to decrease their influence. With the right balance of avoidance and exposure, your anxiety will be a thing of the past.