Desensitization

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Anxiety and Systematic Desensitization

Whether it's heights, snakes, public speaking or broccoli, many people have fears. If a fear becomes too strong or begins negatively impacting various aspects of your life, it is a phobia. People avoid their fears and phobias. To some level, this makes sense. When something is scary, avoid it. But what if your fear is bridges and you must take one to visit your family? What if public speaking is a part of your new job? Avoidance becomes problematic.

Phobias and fears are anxiety. Anxiety tricks you into being more anxious just as depression makes you more depressed. Anxiety convinces you that avoiding your fear is the only option. In actuality, exposing yourself to the fear is the only way to lessen the anxiety and return to desired functioning.

Your body is an amazing machine. The last time you stepped into a chilly swimming pool or a scalding bath, your brain told you to escape immediately. You knew, though, that after staying in (exposing yourself) your body would adapt. This process is called habituation and it works on fears just as well as hot tubs. The water temperature didn't change, rather your body became better able to deal with the sensation.

Desensitize Yourself

Systematic desensitization is the process of addressing your fears through exposure and allowing your body to habituate. Here's how:

- **Understand your fear.** Taking time to consider your fear is the best place to begin. Acknowledge the impact and ability to avoid. If you live in Florida and have a fear of polar bears, you are likely safe and desensitization is not needed. If your fear cannot be avoided practically, move ahead.
- **Strap on armor.** Relaxation techniques are your armor. They work as damage control after exposure to anxiety and as prevention when you know anxiety is yet to come. Spending weeks practicing and perfecting a variety of relaxation techniques will limit the consequence of anxiety.

- **Make your fear hierarchy.** A fear hierarchy is a break-down of varying degrees of exposure to a fear. If you are afraid of bridges, thinking of a bridge, seeing a picture of a bridge, standing on a bridge and driving on a bridge will all provoke different degrees of anxiety. Compile a list of 10 – 15 items and rank anxiety associated with each. An online search will provide you with sample hierarchies to customize.
- **Begin the exposure.** Begin with the lowest anxiety-provoking item on your hierarchy and complete the exposure. Be aware and rate your anxiety during the process. Within minutes, it will peak. Utilize your relaxation techniques and ignore your desire to flee. Running away only increases anxiety. Over time, 20 – 30 minutes, you anxiety rating will reduce. Once it lowers to a 2 or 3 out of 10, the exposure is over.
- **Repeat.** With step one being a success; you are free to move to the next step. Some people can complete multiple steps in one day while others need a period of recovery in between. Push yourself but be realistic.

Conclusion

Phobias, fears and anxieties restrict your life. Live with fear no longer. Systematic desensitization is a proven method to get results. Depending on your intensity and type of phobia, consider consulting a therapist. Something this valuable may be better left to the professionals.