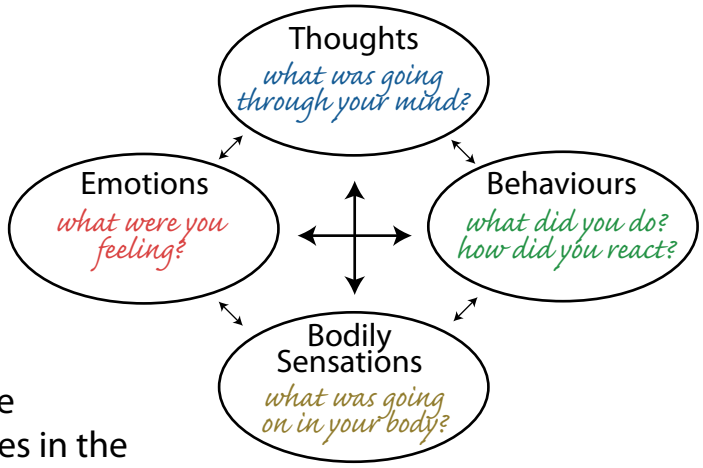
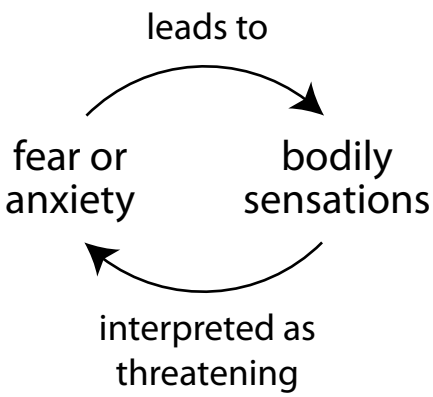
Interoceptive Exposure



At any moment we can be aware of what emotions we are feeling, what we are thinking, what we are doing, and what is going on in our bodies. Some people are more aware than others about what is going on in their body.

Anxiety problems often involve a *fear of bodily sensations or symptoms*. This is problematic because in response to fear it is natural to experience changes in the same bodily sensations. It is possible for a feedback loop (vicious cycle) to develop quickly:



Fears of bodily sensations can be increased and kept going because of:

- *Avoidance / Safety-Seeking Behaviours*
  Trying to avoid having the bodily sensations, or avoiding places where they tend to happen, means that there are fewer oppotunities to learn about how dangerous they really are. Likewise, safety-seeking behaviours prevent learning about the true level of danger
- *Catastrophic Misinterpretations (Meaning / Beliefs)*
  Having negative beliefs about the symptoms (e.g. *"I won't be able to cope", "This is dangerous"*) increase the level of panic, and mean that symptoms are more likely to be feared and avoided
- *Interoceptive conditioning*
  if the symptom precedes an experience of anxiety the body will become sensitive to it (i.e. 'learned' that this symptom predicts fear)

Treating fear of bodily sensations

Interoceptive exposure means exposure to bodily sensations. Exposure to feared body sensations is necessary to learn how dangerous they *truly* are.

The aims of interoceptive exposure are:

- To elicit the feared body sensations
- To activate any unhelpful beliefs associated with the body sensations
- To maintain the feared body sensations without distraction or avoidance (exposure)
- To allow new learning about the bodily sensations to take place

Key reference: Barlow, D. H., Craske, M. G. (2006) *Mastery of your anxiety and panic* (Fourth edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press

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Interoceptive Exposure

The interoceptive exposure exercises on the next page are intended to help you learn more about your symptoms of panic. They are **not** dangerous, but they do tend to induce moderate feelings of discomfort. It is natural to want to avoid symptoms we find uncomfortable because avoiding leads to a sense of relief in the short term, but in the long run avoidance means that we continue to suffer. Overcoming your panic is likely to involve doing these exercises a number of times.

Precautions

You should be in generally good health to attempt these exercises. If you have any of the following conditions then check with your doctor whether it is safe for you to complete these interoceptive exposure exercises:

- Epilepsy or seizures
- Cardiac (heart) conditions
- Asthma or lung problems
- Pregnant
- Neck problems, back problems, or other physical difficulties

Carrying out interoceptive exposure exercises

The tasks on the next page are intended to produce a variety of feelings in your body. They are not dangerous, but even in people without panic they tend to induce moderate feelings of discomfort. Try all of them to begin with to find out which symptoms your panic responds to. Read the instructions, including how long you're supposed to carry out each task for. To begin with you may find it helpful to have someone with you when you practice the exercises.

Rules to stick to:

- Try to complete each task for the allotted time
- Stopping early counts as avoiding - try not to let your feelings get the better of you
- Focus on the sensations during the interoceptive exposure - try not to distract yourself
- Let go of your normal safety behaviours

Making interoceptive exposure even more effective

Once you have had some practice you can do some things to make these exercises even more effective:

- Carry out each exercise multiple times
- Do each exercise on your own rather than with other people around
- Try each exercise in different places - e.g. outdoors rather than indoors
- Try exercises for longer periods

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Interoceptive Exposure

If you have any health concerns, or physical health problems, then you should speak to your doctor about the suitability of these exercises for you before you attempt them. They are designed to be uncomfortable, but should not be painful.

Activity		Symptoms & Thoughts What did you notice in your body? What went through your mind?	Anxiety (0-100)
Breathing			
Overbreathe *Breathe forcefully, fast and deep*	1 min		
Breathe through a straw *Hold your nose and breathe through a drinking straw*	2 min		
Hold your breath	30 sec		
Physical exercise			
Run quickly on the spot *Lift your knees high*	2 min		
Step up and down on a stair *Hold on to the handrail for balance*	2 min		
Tense all body muscles	1 min		
Spinning & shaking			
Spin while sitting in an office chair *As fast as you can*	1 min		
Spin around while standing up *Make sure to leave yourself enough space & have a place to sit after*	1 min		
Shake your head from side to side *Then look straight ahead. Keep your eyes open.*	30 sec		
Head-rush			
Put your head between your legs then *sit up quickly*	1 min		
Lie down & relax for at least one minute then *sit up quickly*	1 min		
Unreality			
Stare at yourself in a mirror *Concentrate hard without blinking*	2 min		
Stare at a blank wall *Concentrate hard without blinking*	2 min		
Stare at a fluorescent light and then try to read something	1 min		

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