

The Interoceptive Exposure Technique

What is Interoceptive Exposure?

Interoceptive Exposure is a powerful cognitive behavioral technique designed to help people overcome the fear of harmless physical sensations. Often, individuals who struggle with panic attacks, health anxiety, or severe stress become hypersensitive to natural bodily shifts. Such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, or dizziness.

When these sensations occur, the brain misinterprets them as dangerous, triggering a "fight or flight" response that only intensifies the physical symptoms. Interoceptive Exposure breaks this cycle by having you intentionally and safely trigger these physical sensations. By repeatedly experiencing the bodily feelings in a controlled environment without avoiding them, you teach your brain that the sensations are uncomfortable, but ultimately harmless.

Case Example: "I'm having a heart attack"

Mark, an accountant, had been experiencing sudden panic attacks for several months. Whenever he noticed his heart beating a little faster than usual, he would immediately have the thought, "I'm having a heart attack," and would sit perfectly still, terrified to move until it passed.

During a session, the therapist suggested testing Mark's fear about his racing heart.

- **Therapist:** You mentioned that a racing heart makes you think you are in medical danger. I'd like to show you a tool called Interoceptive Exposure that can help us test that thought. Want to give it a try?
- **Mark:** I'm pretty nervous about making my heart rate go up on purpose, but I'll try.
- **Therapist:** That nervous feeling is completely normal. I'd like you to jog in place or do jumping jacks right here in the office for one full minute. Try to get your heart rate up as much as possible.
- **Mark:** (Exercises for one minute, breathing heavily) Okay, I'm done. My heart is pounding really fast. I feel a lot of anxiety right now.
- **Therapist:** Notice that pounding sensation. Is it the exact same feeling that triggers your panic attacks?
- **Mark:** Yes, it feels exactly like the start of a panic attack.
- **Therapist:** Now, let's just sit here together and observe it. Regardless of how we brought this feeling on, your heart is racing right now. Are you having a heart attack, or is this just an uncomfortable physical sensation that you can tolerate?
- **Mark:** (Taking a few breaths) No... I'm not having a heart attack. It is really uncomfortable, but I can handle it. It's starting to slow down on its own.

After the exercise, Mark realized that the physical sensation of a racing heart was not inherently dangerous. By intentionally bringing on the symptom, he stripped the fear away from it, recognizing that his body was just experiencing a normal physical response, not a medical emergency.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify a physical sensation that triggers anxiety or panic for you (e.g., dizziness, breathlessness, rapid heartbeat, chest tightness). Write it down:

Step 2. Select a safe, brief exercise that will intentionally trigger this exact sensation from the menu below, or create your own. Write your chosen exercise and duration here:

Step 3. Before doing the exercise, write down what you are afraid will happen when you feel this sensation (e.g., "I will pass out," "I will lose control"):

Step 4. Set a timer and perform the exercise. Make sure you fully engage in the activity to bring on the bodily sensation.

Step 5. Stop the exercise and sit with the sensation. Do not use any "safety behaviors" (like drinking water, lying down, or distracting yourself). Simply observe the physical feeling as it peaks and gradually fades. Wait until the sensation and your anxiety drop by at least 50%.

Step 6. Review the outcome. Did your feared prediction from Step 3 actually come true? Is it possible that this sensation is just a normal, harmless bodily function?

Interoceptive Exposure Exercise Menu

Select an exercise that most closely mimics the physical symptoms of your anxiety.

Target Sensation	Exercise Options	Recommended Duration
Rapid Heart Rate / Palpitations	• Running in place (lifting knees high) • Jumping jacks • Stepping up and down quickly on a bottom stair	1 to 2 minutes
Dizziness / Lightheadedness	• Spinning in a swivel office chair • Standing up and spinning around in a circle • Shaking the head quickly from side to side	30 to 60 seconds (or 10–15 full rotations)
Breathlessness / Smothering Fear	• Breathing exclusively through a thin straw (with nose pinched) • Breathing fast and shallowly (hyperventilating)	1 to 2 minutes
Chest Tightness / Tension	• Inhaling deeply and holding the breath	30 to 45 seconds

	• Exhaling completely and holding the breath out	(or as long as safely possible)
Unreality / Dissociation	• Staring fixedly at a tiny dot on a blank wall without blinking • Staring intensely into one's own eyes in a mirror	2 to 3 minutes
Throat Tightness / Choking Fear	• Swallowing continuously and as quickly as possible	30 to 60 seconds (or 5-6 rapid swallows)
Sweating / Flushes	• Wearing a heavy winter coat in a warm room • Drinking a hot beverage quickly	3 to 5 minutes

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **Consult a Physician First:** Before intentionally elevating your heart rate or inducing dizziness, it is always a good idea to get clearance from a doctor to ensure you have no underlying medical conditions that would make these exercises unsafe.
- **Titrate the Exposure:** If a 1-minute exercise feels too overwhelming, start smaller. Try 15 seconds first. Once you realize the sensation is tolerable, increase the duration to 30 seconds, and eventually to the full time.
- **Lean Into the Discomfort:** The goal of this technique is not to stay calm. The goal is to feel the anxiety and the physical discomfort, and then realize that you can tolerate it without anything catastrophic happening.
- **Drop Your Safety Behaviors:** If you spin in a chair to get dizzy, but then immediately grip the arms of the chair and close your eyes to feel safe, you are still telling your brain the dizziness is dangerous. Experience the sensation without doing anything to "save" yourself.

- **Repetition is Key:** A single trial rarely results in long-term habituation. For best results, aim for 3 to 5 back-to-back trials of the same exercise. By the final repetition, the sensation should feel boring or merely annoying rather than terrifying.

Final Note

Ultimately, Interoceptive Exposure teaches you to stop treating your own body like a threat. When you intentionally invite in the physical sensations you usually run from, you take away their power. You begin to realize that you are resilient enough to handle physical discomfort, freeing you to live your life without constantly monitoring your body for false alarms.