

What Goes Up Must Come Down

Part Two: Conquering the Cycle of Panic

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In Part I of this article, we examined how the cycle of anxiety and panic builds over time, with negative memories fueling anticipatory anxiety, which in turn can lead to full-on panic attacks. Here, we explore how high anxiety, feared situations and panic attacks impact our lives, and how we can face our worst-case-scenarios head-on and conquer our fears

As we discussed in Part I of this article, we all have situations or scenarios that make us anxious. We go to great lengths limit or avoid situations that make us anxious. If what makes you anxious is taking needless risks, for example, then all is well. There is no need in daily life to walk tightropes, eat fire or walk into a hungry lion's den.

But when the situations we avoid limit our participation in and enjoyment of life, they become problematic. Even worse, avoiding anxiety- and panic-provoking situations only increases our anxiety.

From bad to worse at our own expense

Let's look at an example of problematic avoidance behavior. Joe, was a passenger in a car involved in a winter pile-up in a snowstorm over a decade ago. After that experience, he developed a fear of driving in bad weather, and avoided doing so. After a while, he began avoiding driving on multi-lane highways if there was a chance of snow or rain and eventually decided to stay off of multi-lane highways altogether, even if someone whose driving he trusted was behind the wheel.

He started making excuses when friends would invite him to go skiing or hiking, activities he loved, and would take on extra work to avoid short road trips out of the city that he, along with his wife and children had long enjoyed. Joe's avoidance behaviors began to affect his friendships, and limit his family's leisure activities, and his enjoyment of activities in nature, pursuits that he had cherished throughout his life. His anxiety had gone from bad to worse, at his own expense.

Overcoming anxiety and panic

And how do we do this? There is a well-known, highly successful approach to overcoming anxiety and panic; mastering whatever makes us anxious. We overcome feared situations by exposure to them — by riding out feared situations over and over again, so often that we become bored of them.

Ride out and repeat

That's right, if you have a situation that makes you anxious, you need to stay in it and ride out the feelings of anxiety. And you need to repeat the experience over and over again until you are bored by it.

How do we become bored? We simply and *intentionally* repeat what we are doing and over and over again until we can do it almost without thinking. If you're afraid of driving, become the go-to driver in your friend group. If you have social anxiety and hate going to parties, accept every invitation that comes your way and practice partying. If you have a fear of deep water, take swimming lessons and get into loving the deep end. If you're afraid of public speaking, join a club, like *Toastmasters*, where you'll have endless opportunities to become bored of speaking in front of others.

Rules of exposure

Mental health experts refer to this method of overcoming anxiety as *exposure therapy*. The goal of exposure therapy is to free the participant from the limitations of anxieties, by replacing negative experiences with experiences that build confidence and a sense of capability in handling tasks and

situations. Like every good approach to healing, exposure therapy has tried and true rules.

With exposure therapy, you can gain control over situations that cause you anxiety, discomfort, and panic.

When it comes to exposure therapy, there are three simple and clear rules. *Take it slow and easy.* Take baby steps to gain confidence. The last thing you want to do is go too fast or too tough and to deepen your anxiety and setting yourself back. *Stay in the 'exposure' environment of your feared setting or scenario for at least 15 minutes.* This may seem like an eternity, but you need to give yourself time to allow a new — less traumatic and more in control— experience to take root and sink into your experience. Repeat yourself. You have to experience your exposure setting or scenario three, four, or five times a week. If you do something only once or twice a week, it will always feel like a new task. The more you do something, the stronger that muscle becomes.

Take back control

Recognize that you can regain control of your anxieties by riding out feared situations, whatever is causing your anxiety, and limiting your ability to live your life the way you would prefer.

Realize that strategies like managing physical symptoms through breathing or grounding

practices, challenging negative thoughts, and practicing exposure therapy are tried and true methods that build self-confidence, and create positive memories, and banish crippling anxieties. You can make your faith in yourself and your skill sets bigger than your anxieties and self-doubts. Through your intentions, strategies, thoughts, and efforts, you can conquer anxiety and panic once and for all.

Conquering feared experiences

Take baby steps to gain confidence. Slow, steady incremental exposure to feared situations will win the day.

Stay in your exposure environment for at least 15 minutes at a time, to create new positive memories

Build that new muscle! Enter into your exposure environment or experience three to five times a week. The more you exercise that muscle, the stronger it becomes.

Make your faith in your ability to conquer your feared situations bigger than your fear

Seek professional help if you are feeling hopeless and overwhelmed by your anxieties

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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.

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