

Session 2 Handout

1. Complete Comfort Plan
2. Practice Exposure for 20 min daily
3. If applicable, practice Applied Tension
4. Other Resources

1. Comfort Game Plan

Some people are able to get through vaccination using these [Comfort Strategies](#) designed to reduce needle-related pain and fear. After you review the strategies, complete your [Comfort Game Plan](#).

If this isn't enough because the fear response is just too big, you can overcome this fear through exposure (see below).

2. Exposure

Exposure therapy breaks fear into smaller, more manageable steps so the brain can rewire its automatic fight-or-flight response to needles and learn through experience that needles (while unpleasant) are safe. At each step, if you stay with the situation long enough, your anxiety starts to become less powerful. This is because anxiety takes a lot of energy and at some point it “runs out of gas.” The longer you face something, the more you get used to it and the less anxious you will feel when you face it again.

Importantly, the goal of exposure is not to get “rid” of anxiety. For people with needle phobia, needles are extremely unpleasant, period. However, repeated exposure that *you* are directing leads to increased confidence that you can handle the surges of anxiety triggered by needles. In other words, the focus is less on eliminating anxiety but on allowing you to carry that anxiety along with you while you move towards values-based actions like accessing healthcare.

You can start easy and move slowly to harder ones when you feel ready. Or, you can speed things up by doing harder items on your exposure hierarchy.

HOMEWORK GOAL:

Using the steps below, practice exposure for at least 15-20 min daily, building up to your goal of getting vaccinated.

Exposure Steps

Step 1. Optional: Induce relaxation (not too much, not too little) using your preferred relaxation technique (e.g., belly breathing).

Step 2. Read the appropriate item from your hierarchy.

- **What are you most worried will happen when you approach this item? Be specific! (On a scale of 0-100, how likely does that seem?)**

E.g., “I will not be able to tolerate the anxiety and I will have a panic attack, which will ruin the rest of my week and I will be unable to do any of my tasks at work. (70)”

Step 3. The goal is to go into the situation long enough for your confidence to increase and learn if your feared prediction comes true or not. Go into the situation for a tolerable time. Note: The length of “a tolerable time” will vary. 10 seconds of exposure might be all you can tolerate at first. Slowly increase the amount of time you spend in the situation on subsequent presentations until you can tolerate extended periods of exposure (e.g., 15-30 min exposure challenges).

Step 4. At the start, notice your **distress level (0-100)**: _____.

Step 5. Go back into the situation and stay there for a tolerable time – the longer the better.

Step 6. After sufficient time, stop and notice your **distress level (0-100)**: _____.

- **Did what you were most worried about occur? [yes/no].** _____.
- **How do you know?**

-
- **What did you learn?**
-

Step 7. Try to stick with each activity until you notice that it gets easier to approach the situation or complete the task. Don't stop if your anxiety is high or it can be hard to come back.

Remember: anxiety cannot hurt you! Repeat the above procedure for the next item, beginning with Step 1.

(Optional: End the session with several minutes of relaxation.)

Practice, practice, practice

- **Start gradually.** Starting with an easier item, repeatedly engage in that activity until you feel greater confidence approaching it.

- **Stick with it.** If the situation is one that you can remain in for a prolonged period of time, stay in the situation long enough for your anxiety to lessen and/or your confidence in handling the anxiety to increase.
- **Loop it.** If the situation is short in duration, try “looping” it, which involves doing the same thing over and over again for a set number of times (e.g., repeatedly looking at photos and videos of needles with curiosity and detail-orientation).
- **Daily practice.** Pick a time of day when you don’t feel rushed. An example of a good time of day for me to practice is: _____
- **Be patient.** Sometimes it will take a while to get used to something. Wait as long as you need to, stick with this brave practice, and keep encouraging yourself along the way. It may seem to take a long time, but you will get used to what you are practicing over time.
- **Reward yourself!** After you practice, reward yourself! Exposure is very hard, but worthwhile work.

Other exposure ideas

(From Seattle Children’s Hospital)

<u>Easier steps</u>	<u>Medium steps</u>	<u>Challenging steps</u>
♡ Draw pictures of needles, blood or blood draws	♡ Place tourniquet on arm	♡ Watch a video of a shot (where the patient is calm)
♡ Watch positive videos about how vaccines work	♡ Wipe alcohol swab on arm	♡ Watch a video of a blood draw while holding your arm behind the screen
♡ Smell an alcohol swab	♡ Perform fake steps of a shot or blood draw on a family member	♡ Going through the steps of a shot in doctor’s office
♡ Play with and hold a tourniquet and bandages	♡ Receive pretend shot with a dull item (e.g., finger, pencil)	♡ Getting a shot or blood draw
♡ Sit in lab waiting room for 10 minutes (no shot)	♡ Sit in a medical clinic room for 10 minutes (no shot)	
	♡ Use a needle to poke a piece of fruit, or extract juice	

Possible materials you can use for exposure

- Our directory of “[easy](#)” vaccine-related videos. The videos include tips, tricks, and strategies shared by others with needle phobia.
- Our directory of “[harder](#)” vaccine-related videos. These videos include people receiving flu and COVID-19 vaccines. We have some great [audio](#) imaginal exposures too.
- You can purchase your own syringes for under \$10, for example [these ones](#). This exposure exercise would NOT involve puncturing your skin (you would need a trained professional to maintain adequate sterilization practices). The goal is to simply get familiarized with the feared object by holding it in your hand.
- You can practice safely poking (but not puncturing) your arm with a different object.

3. If you faint, practice Applied Tension

Some people experience a drop in blood pressure at the sign of needles. This automatic reflex is called a vasovagal response. This response is not dangerous or life-threatening. But thankfully, there are also ways to manage and prevent the fainting response, as explained below.

Applied Tension

1. Find a comfortable chair. Begin by tensing the muscles of your torso and legs (some find it helpful to squeeze their knees together)
2. Hold tension for 10 to 15 s, release tension for 20 to 30 s, repeat 5 times
3. You can practice measuring your blood pressure after this procedure to notice that this is a safe way to increase your blood pressure
4. Practice this exercise 2 times per day during the next week
5. Use this exercise during exposure to “fainting items”

Note: Don’t overdo it. If you are getting headaches it could mean that you’re tensing too hard. If this happens, don’t tense the muscles as hard.

Note: it’s helpful for you to know the physical symptoms you experience just before you faint. These will be different for different people. You may feel:

- light-headed
- clammy
- nauseous
- hot or cold flushes
- or other symptoms (everyone is unique!)

Other strategies to manage fainting:

1. Speak up: let the provider know about your history of fainting.
2. Ask if you can lie down while you are getting vaccinated. Rest (e.g., in a chair) for 30 minutes after the procedure.
3. Stay hydrated.

4. Other Resources

For many, this brief program will be one of multiple steps required in order to manage needle phobia adequately enough to access all of your healthcare goals. Below are further steps you can consider.

- Follow-up options

- Full course of CBT exposure therapy (can take about 8-16 sessions, can be expensive, although many PPO insurance plans will provide reimbursement)
 - [Referral List for Blood-Injury-Injection Phobia](#)
 - [ABCT Therapist Directory](#)
 - [Psychology Today CBT Therapist Directory](#)
 - [Academy of CBT Therapist Directory](#)
- Clinical hypnotherapy may help those with a needle phobia.
 - Hypnotherapy involves getting into a state of deep relaxation, and using visualization techniques to explore the phobia further.
 - There has not been much research done on hypnotherapy for the treatment of needle phobia, but there has been limited research suggesting its efficacy.
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) has also been used to treat needle phobia, but again, research on EMDR for the treatment of needle phobia is *very limited*.
 - The goal of EMDR is to safely recall the past memory of when the phobia began and integrate new material from the present so that you can learn that the object or situation is no longer as dangerous, and that you can cope with it.
- Other options
 - The [Needle Phobia Support Group](#) on Facebook can be a very supportive, empathic community for some. They hold monthly virtual peer support meetings and members frequently share stories about how they managed their needle phobia symptoms in order to get successfully vaccinated.
 - Learn from others: you can find a collective of relevant videos and stories about people with needle phobia getting vaccinated [here](#).

Thank you for participating!

Did learning these strategies help you get vaccinated? We want to know! You can email freeneedlephobiaCBT@gmail.com to share your victory!