

## Acceptance of Anxiety Exercise

We adapted and tailored the Acceptance of Anxiety exercise to individuals with anxiety disorders from a more general set of acceptance exercises introduced by Segal and colleagues (2002) for use with depressed persons. At first, many clients are horrified by the notion that they should accept their anxiety, so explain to clients that accepting anxiety does not mean liking or wanting anxiety. It means dropping the rope and willingly making space for it when it is there – simply because it is there anyway. It means learning to see anxiety as it is (i.e., a jumble of uncomfortable feelings and physical sensations in the body) not as what their mind tells them it is (i.e., something dangerous, intolerable sensations that must be defeated, a sign that disaster is about to strike).

Tell clients that this exercise contains some elements from the Acceptance of Thoughts and Feelings exercise but focuses more explicitly on awareness of anxiety-related thoughts and bodily sensations and staying with such experiences until they no longer pull on the client's attention. The exercise is about actively making space for anxiety-related thoughts, feelings, and other experiences by allowing or letting them be rather than rushing in to fix or change them (Segal et al., 2002). When clients let anxiety be – simply noticing and observing whatever is already present – they begin to create space for it, thereby opening up a fundamentally different way of being with their anxiety experience. This exercise is critical because it specifically teaches clients new skills that foster a new way of relating with anxiety-related aversive bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Such experiences will likely show up in future sessions and in real-life situations as clients move forward on their path toward valued life goals. We suggest that therapists read the instructions to clients in a slow and soft manner. The instructions for the exercise are also on the book CD.

1. In our previous exercises, we have used the breath as the focus of attention. When the mind wandered off and started focusing on thoughts, worries, images, or feelings, you were asked to notice these thoughts and feelings and then gently redirect attention back to your breath. In this exercise, we actively and openly invite into our awareness bodily sensations and unwanted thoughts, worries, and images so that you may learn to approach them in an accepting and compassionate way. Just like in the finger trap and tug-of-war exercises, this exercise encourages you to lean into anxiety rather than fight it. Leaning into anxiety means creating a space for you to feel your emotions and think your thoughts, experiencing them as they are, rather than what your mind tells you they are. It also provides you with space to do things with your life that you may have

put on hold for a long time. Are you willing to do an exercise to help you do that? [Wait for client's permission and then move on.]

2. Go ahead and get in a comfortable position in your chair. Sit upright with your feet flat on the floor, your arms and legs uncrossed, and your hands resting in your lap (palms up or down, whichever is more comfortable). Allow your eyes to close gently [pause 10 seconds].
3. Take a few moments to get in touch with the physical sensations in your body, especially the sensations of touch or pressure where your body makes contact with the chair or floor. Notice the gentle rising and falling of your breath in your chest and belly. There is no need to control your breathing in any way – simply let the breath breathe itself [pause 10 seconds]. As best you can, also bring this attitude of allowing and gentle acceptance to the rest of your experience. There is nothing to be fixed. Simply allow your experience to be your experience, without needing it to be other than what it is [pause 10 seconds].
4. It is natural for your mind to wander away to thoughts, worries, images, bodily sensations, or feelings. Notice these thoughts and feelings, acknowledge their presence, and stay with them [pause 10 seconds]. There is no need to think of something else, make them go away, or resolve anything. As best you can, allow them to be ... giving yourself space to have whatever you have ... bringing a quality of kindness and compassion to your experience [pause 10 seconds].
5. Allow yourself to be present to what you are afraid of. Notice any doubts, reservations, fears, and worries. Just notice them and acknowledge their presence, and do not work on them [pause 10 seconds]. Now see if for just a moment you can be present with your values and commitments. Ask yourself, Why am I here? Where do I want to go? What do I want to do? [pause 15 seconds]
6. Now focus on a thought or situation that has been difficult for you. It could be a particular troubling thought, worry, image, or intense bodily sensation [pause 10 seconds]. Gently, directly, and firmly shift your attention on and into the discomfort, no matter how bad it seems [pause 10 seconds]. Notice any strong feelings that may arise in your body, allowing them to be as they are rather than what you think they are, simply holding them in awareness [pause 10 seconds]. Stay with your discomfort and breathe with it [pause 10 seconds]. See if you can gently open up to it and make space for it, accepting and allowing it to be [pause], while bringing compassionate and focused attention to the sensations of discomfort [pause 15 seconds].

7. If you notice yourself tensing up and resisting what you have, pushing away from the experience, acknowledge that and see if you can make some space for whatever you're experiencing [pause 10 seconds]. Must this feeling or thought be your enemy? [pause 10 seconds] Or can you have it, notice it, own it, and let it be? [pause 10 seconds] Can you make room for the discomfort, for the tension, for the anxiety? [pause 10 seconds] What does it really feel like – moment to moment – to have them? [pause 10 seconds] Is this something you must struggle with or can you invite the discomfort in, saying to yourself with willingness, "Let me have it; let me feel what there is to be felt because it is my experience right now?" [pause 15 seconds]
8. If the sensations or discomfort grow stronger, acknowledge their presence, stay with them [pause 10 seconds], breathing with them, accepting them [pause 10 seconds]. Is this discomfort something you must not have, you cannot have? [pause 10 seconds] Even if your mind tells you that you cannot, can you open up a space for it in your heart? [pause 10 seconds] Is there room inside you to feel that with compassion and kindness toward yourself and your experience? [pause 15 seconds]
9. Apart from physical sensations in the body, you may also notice thoughts coming along with the sensations, and thoughts about the thoughts. When you notice any such thoughts, also invite them in ... softening and opening to them as you become aware of them [pause 10 seconds]. You may also notice your mind coming up with evaluative labels such as "dangerous" or "getting worse." If that happens, you can simply thank your mind for the label [pause 10 seconds] and return to the present experience as it is, not as your mind says it is, noticing thoughts as thoughts, physical sensations as physical sensations, feelings as feelings – nothing more, nothing less [pause 15 seconds].
10. Stay with your discomfort for as long as it pulls on your attention [pause 10 seconds]. If and when you sense that the anxiety and other discomfort are no longer pulling for your attention, let them go [pause 15 seconds].
11. Then, when you are ready, gradually widen your attention to take in the sounds around you in this room [pause 10 seconds]. Take a moment to make the intention to bring this sense of gentle allowing and self-acceptance into the present moment [pause 5 seconds], and when you are ready, slowly open your eyes.