

Are You Anxious About Going on Dates?

Objective

To help you manage your anxiety related to going on dates through exposure therapy.

You Should Know

Most people agree that dating is a stressful experience, filled with hopes, worries, expectations, and fears. For people with social anxiety, the prospect of meeting a total stranger in a public place can be at best worrisome, at worst paralyzing. The list of “what ifs” is clamoring in your brain: *Will they like me? Will I find them attractive? Will they find me attractive? What will we talk about? What if they see me sweating or blushing? What if I get so nervous I can't even talk? What if we have nothing in common? What if they want to kiss or hug? What if they want to talk about kids or marriage? What if???* . . . You get the idea.

What would it be like to relax (at least a little more) and enjoy these experiences? To really be present and have fun meeting someone new and learning about them and sharing about yourself. Hard to imagine? Well, it can be done.

You might already be working on practicing some strategies to overcome your fears related to dating. One strategy is called “exposure therapy,” which means that you actually do (or “expose yourself” to) the people, places, and situations you fear in order to overcome your anxiety. It might sound scary at first, but there is a clear method you can follow that has been proven successful by experts. (See the worksheet called “Understanding the Principles of Exposure Therapy.”)

The first step is to identify the aspects of dating that you fear and then rate them on a special scale, called the SUDS scale (Subjective Units of Distress). In subsequent worksheets, you may work on “Strategies for Overcoming Anxiety About Going on Dates” and “Exposure Therapy for Anxiety About Going on Dates.”

What to Do

Here are some typical fears and symptoms that people with social anxiety experience before or during a date:

- Shaking, trembling
- Increased blood pressure
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizziness, fainting
- Nausea, gagging, vomiting
- Worry about being judged or criticized
- Worry about your appearance

- Worry about others criticizing how you stand, walk, present yourself publicly

Now, list below at least ten situations that cause you anxiety when you think about dating or when you are on a date. Afterward, you will rate the items. There is no right answer—write down whatever comes to mind.

1. _____ SUDS Rating _____

2. _____ SUDS Rating _____

3. _____ SUDS Rating _____

4. _____ SUDS Rating _____

5. _____ SUDS Rating _____

6. _____ SUDS Rating _____

7. _____ SUDS Rating _____

8. _____ SUDS Rating _____

9. _____ SUDS Rating _____

10. _____ SUDS Rating _____

Now, review the rating scale below and think about each situation on your list. Then assign each situation the number that applies most closely. Your answer is purely subjective. It's also based on what you feel *today*, not yesterday or tomorrow or some distant time in the future. If you're working with a therapist, this scale can help you understand the severity of your social anxiety related to going on dates, and also, ideally, show you that not every situation is off-the-charts terrifying or paralyzing.

SUDS Scale

- 0: Totally relaxed
- 1: Somewhat relaxed
- 2: Minimal anxiety/distress
- 3: Mild anxiety/distress, doesn't interfere with performance
- 4: Mild to moderate anxiety
- 5: Moderate anxiety/distress, can continue to perform
- 6: Moderate to quite anxious
- 7: Quite anxious/distressed, interfering with performance
- 8: Very anxious/distressed, can't concentrate
- 9: Extremely anxious/distressed, feeling desperate, unable to handle it
- 10: Highest level of distress/fear/anxiety that you have ever felt, can't function

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What situation or symptom causes you the most distress about dating?

2. What situation or symptom causes you the least distress about dating?

3. On a scale from 1-10 (1 = not at all, 10 = highly motivated), how would you rank your motivation to work on one of the *lower-rated items* on your list (5 or under) in the coming weeks by using "exposure therapy" (practicing and role-playing) techniques? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
