

# Words Useful in Thinking About Reducing Fears and Aversions

**Aversion:** An association between a certain situation and an unpleasant feeling. Many people have an aversion to the sound of fingernails scraping on a chalkboard.

**Feared situation:** A situation that brings out the emotion of fear. Fear is one of many unpleasant emotions whose association with a situation creates an aversion.

**Unrealistic or unwanted fear or aversion:** An aversion or fear that you wish you didn't have. An aversion to the taste of a poisonous plant is realistic and wanted; an aversion to eating a nutritious food is usually unrealistic and unwanted. A fear of driving dangerously fast is realistic and wanted; a fear of meeting someone new at a party is usually unrealistic and unwanted.

**SUD level:** A rating of how much discomfort or suffering you are experiencing at any given time. Often the rating is on a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 meaning no bad feelings, and 10 meaning extremely unpleasant bad feelings. The bad feelings can be fear, disgust, feeling grossed out, feeling angry, or any other unpleasant feelings. SUD stands for "Subjective Units of Distress." (or Discomfort, or Disturbance)

**Mastery versus avoidance choice point:** The choice: "Do I want to get over this aversion (called mastery), or do I just want to stay away from the situation that I have an aversion to (called avoidance)?"

**Internal sales pitch:** A list of reasons why you want to go for mastery rather than avoidance.

**Hierarchy:** A list of situations you have a fear of or aversion to, in order of their SUD level. Hopefully you can find some situations that have a small and moderate SUD level.

**Habituation:** Habituation means getting used to a situation, the longer you are exposed to it. As you get used to the situation that brings forth unrealistic fear or aversion, the SUD level falls. Another word that means almost the same thing is *desensitization*. Desensitization means using exposure, hierarchy, and habituation, often with relaxation also, to reduce or eliminate a fear or aversion.

**Exposure:** To do an exposure is to put yourself in a situation that brings forth a fear or aversion, so you can habituate, or get used to, that situation. Another way of viewing exposure is that it gives you the opportunity to practice handling the situation well. Usually you start exposures with situations fairly low or moderate in SUD level rather than those at the top of the hierarchy.

**Long-enough Exposure:** Exposure that is long enough for habituation to take place. Long exposures tend to reduce SUD levels and eventually get rid of fears and aversions. Brief exposures followed by escape from the exposure situation, on the other hand, tend to make fears and aversions stronger (because the relief reinforces the escape-seeking behavior).

**Self-talk:** What you say to yourself. If your self-talk during the exposure is "I hate this, I can't wait for this to be over, why am I doing this, I hate it that this is so hard for me," then habituation doesn't come

as fast, or maybe not at all. If the self-talk is “Hooray, I’m doing something really courageous and self-disciplined; I’m accomplishing something really useful for myself,” then habituation usually comes faster and easier.

**Fantasy rehearsal:** Practicing something, like a deliberate exposure with habituation and useful self-talk, in your imagination rather than real life. It is extremely useful that we can practice in imagination as well as in real life.

**Coping rehearsal:** A fantasy rehearsal in which you imagine yourself having a SUD level with an exposure, but using self-discipline, and keeping up the exposure long enough. Usually you imagine the SUD level going down over time.

**Mastery rehearsal:** A fantasy rehearsal in which you imagine that some miracle (or some hard work) has taken away the bad feelings associated with the situation, and now you are able to handle the situation with comfort and pleasure and no distress at all.

**Fight or flight response:** A reaction our bodies tend to have when responding to scary or aversive situations. We feel excited; our hearts beat faster; our hands sweat more; we tend to breathe faster; we secrete hormones like adrenaline.

**Breathe and relax:** A method of relaxation/meditation. You sit in a quiet place. You notice the rhythm of your breathing. Each time you breathe in, you notice any place in your body where your muscles are tense or tight, even a little bit. Each time you breathe out, you relax those muscles, even if only a little bit more than before. If you notice that your mind wanders from this activity, you don’t get down on yourself for this, but simply bring your attention back to relaxing as you breathe. You don’t try to breathe differently from what comes naturally.

**Mind-watching.** Another method of relaxation/meditation. You sit quietly and relax. You let whatever comes into your mind come, and you simply observe what goes on, with a “benevolent” or kind attitude toward your own thoughts and feelings. You “save part of your mind to observe what the rest of it is doing.” What goes on can include bodily sensations, things you hear or see, images that come to mind, thoughts that come to mind, or anything else you experience.

**Loving kindness meditation:** Another method of relaxation/meditation. You sit quietly and relax. You wish that you will make and carry out the decisions that will increase the happiness, health, and safety both of yourself and of others. Then you wish the same thing for another person, and another, and perhaps for humanity as a whole. I like to wish for becoming the best one can become, giving and receiving kindness, and living in compassion and peace.

**Four-thought exercise:** You think about a certain situation, using four different types of thoughts: not awfulizing (which is a conscious decision not to keep reminding yourself how bad the situation is); goal-setting (deciding what sort of outcome you’re aiming for); listing options and choosing (figuring out what you want to do in this situation); and celebrating your own choice (celebrating that you did the best you could in figuring out what to do).

**Self-discipline:** The skill that lets you do something you don’t feel like doing, or something that is relatively unpleasant, because you want to achieve a worthy goal. It takes self-discipline to do

exposures and to do most of the other parts of the process of reducing fears or aversions.

**PAST BAD and OH RAM PRISM:** Mnemonics for ways of getting over unrealistic fears, as follows:

**Probabilities and utilities:** Figuring out the feared outcome, and then thinking, “How likely is that bad thing to occur?” and “How bad would it be?” If the bad thing isn't very bad, or if it's very unlikely, then you aren't in much danger, and reminding yourself of that tends to lower fear.

**Allies:** Getting a support system, not trying to do the mission all by yourself.

**STEB and STEB revision:** Figure out the situations that there are aversions to or fears of; be aware of what the habits are for thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in that situation. Then decide what thoughts, emotions, and behaviors you'd prefer for that situation, so you can practice them.

**Tones of voice:** Speaking to others or to yourself in calm tones of voice tends to make you feel calmer.

**Breathing:** People often breathe too fast when they are anxious, and it's often helpful to slow down the breathing.

**Activation versus relaxation:** For most fears and aversions, it helps to become more relaxed. There are various methods of doing this.

**Doing, not feeling as the sign of success:** You don't worry too much about how you feel in the situation, but count it as a success if you can choose a good behavior and do it.

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**Objective-formation:** Figuring out what your goals are and why you want to achieve them.

**Hierarchy:** Going along a gradual series of steps, starting with easier ones and working your way up.

**Relationship:** Having a good relationship with whoever is helping you -- including yourself!

**Attribution:** You *attribute* to yourself the potential to eventually succeed. Rather than saying “I can't do it,” you might say, “I think the SUD level would be so high that I don't want to try it yet.”

**Modeling:** You look at, or read about, positive ways of handling the situations.

**Practice:** You rehearse the desirable patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior many times, in fantasy or in real life.

**Reinforcement and punishment:** You try to reward yourself and not to punish yourself for the desirable ways of doing things.

**Instruction:** You read or listen to directions on how to do it.

**Stimulus control:** Put yourself in the situations that bring out the desirable patterns.

**Monitoring:** Keep track of how you do over time; notice your improvement.

## Words Useful in Thinking About Compulsions

**Compulsion:** A behavior you feel you have to do, often over and over, to get rid of a bad feeling, even though there's no reason why the behavior accomplishes anything or makes sense. Examples are washing over and over, counting until certain good numbers reached, checking things over and over, repeating behaviors to make things come out even or symmetrical, arranging things to make them just right.

**A good choice:** In contrast to a compulsion, a behavior that you might do over and over, because it is fun or useful or otherwise worth doing, and the result of a good decision, we call a good choice. Sometimes these are hard to tell from compulsions. For example, doctors are supposed to wash their hands many times a day to keep from spreading infections.

**Exposure:** To do an exposure is to put yourself in the situation that makes you want to do the compulsion. For example, if someone wants to wash hands after touching a doorknob, touching the doorknob is an exposure. If someone wants to even the height of socks when they are uneven, making them uneven is an exposure.

**Ritual Prevention:** Ritual prevention means using the self-discipline that it takes not to do the compulsion, even when exposure is going on. For example, the person touches the doorknob and doesn't let himself wash his hands. Or the person makes his socks uneven and doesn't let himself even them out.

**SUD level:** A rating of how much discomfort or suffering you are experiencing at any given time. Often the rating is on a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 no bad feelings, and 10 meaning extremely unpleasant bad feelings. The bad feelings can be fear, disgust, feeling grossed out, feeling angry, or any other unpleasant feelings. SUD stands for "Subjective Units of Distress."

**Habituation:** Habituation means getting used to the situation of the exposure. As you get used to it, the SUD level falls. For example, someone touches the doorknob and doesn't wash the hands; the SUD level maybe starts at 8 but goes down to 1 over some time of ritual prevention. Or someone puts the socks at different heights and the SUD level starts at 6 and goes to 0 over a time of ritual prevention.

**Prolonged Exposure:** Exposure that is hopefully long enough for habituation to take place. Prolonged exposure reduces SUD levels and eventually gets rid of compulsions. Brief exposures followed by escape from the exposure situation by doing the compulsion, on the other hand, tend to make compulsions stronger.

**Self-talk:** What you say to yourself. If your self-talk during the exposure is "I hate this, I can't wait for this to be over, why am I doing this," then habituation doesn't come as fast. If the self-talk is "Hooray, I'm doing something really courageous and self-disciplined; I'm accomplishing something really useful for myself," then habituation usually comes faster and easier.

**Fantasy rehearsal:** Practicing something, like an exposure and ritual prevention with useful self-talk,

in your imagination rather than real life.

## Words Useful in Thinking about Obsessions

**Intrusive thought or image:** An idea or urge or imagined behavior that comes to mind, that bothers you and you wish didn't come to mind. Usually intrusive thoughts are images of doing or saying something bad and forbidden, something very much against your values.

**Obsession:** Just another name for an intrusive thought or image that comes to mind repeatedly.

**SUD level:** A rating of how much discomfort or suffering you are experiencing at any given time. Often the rating is on a 0 to 10 scale, with 10 worst. The bad feelings can be fear, disgust, shame, feeling grossed out, or any other unpleasant feelings. SUD stands for "Subjective Units of Distress."

**Thought-Behavior Distinction:** The fact that having an image of a behavior in your mind does not force you to do that behavior. People imagine countless behaviors that they never do. Becoming confident you will not do something often requires looking at evidence.

**Desired SUD Levels for Thoughts vs. Behaviors:** Suppose that someone gets the intrusive thought of doing a very bad thing. The person would want the SUD level attached to actually doing the behavior to be very high. The person would want the SUD level attached to having the annoying image come to mind, to be low. Thus the thought-behavior distinction applies to desired SUD levels.

**White Bear Problem:** If you try very hard, right now, NOT to think of a white bear, what comes to mind? For most people, the answer is a white bear. The "white bear problem" refers to the fact that when we try very hard to get thoughts out of our minds, we often only bring them to mind more.

**Letting it run its course:** This means not trying to make the intrusive thought go away, and not trying to bring it on, but just letting it stick around as long as it happens to stick around. You can just relax and observe that thought, noticing the thought-behavior distinction, and reminding yourself that having the thought is not an awful thing. Or you can do something else, while letting it run its course.

**Best use of time:** The answer to the question, what's the best use of my time right now? Often a really good strategy is to do the behavior that's your best use of time while the intrusive thought is running its course.

**Exposure:** In the case of an intrusive thought, exposure means simply being aware of the thought, without trying "escape" by shoving the thought out. Sometimes it's useful to bring the intrusive thought to mind on purpose, so as to practice dealing with it.

**Habituation:** In the case of an intrusive thought, habituation means that over time the SUD level that is brought on by an intrusive thought gets less, usually because of exposure. Habituation = "getting used to it."

**Fantasy rehearsal:** In the case of intrusive thoughts, fantasy rehearsal is to practice in imagination having the intrusive thought come to mind and then either (a) relaxing and observing it, or (b) doing

your best use of time while the thought runs its course.

**Self-talk:** What you say to yourself. Also known as thoughts.

**Self-reinforcement:** Self-talk that congratulates yourself. For example, “Hooray, I was able to do my best use of time even with the intrusive thought running its course!” or “Hooray, I observed the intrusive thought long enough for the SUD level to go down.” Also known as celebrating your choice.

**Fantasy rehearsal of dealing with the thought rather than doing the deed:** Some therapists who work with OCD advise clients who have intrusive fantasies of harmful deeds (such as being violent toward a family member) to imagine themselves carrying out the harmful deed, in graphic detail. I disagree with this approach. I favor imagining that the intrusive thought has come to mind, imagining adaptive thoughts about the intrusive thought, imagining oneself making a good choice of what to actually do, despite the intrusive thought, carrying out the good choice while letting the intrusive thought run in the background, and celebrating both the thought-behavior distinction and the carrying out of a good decision about what to actually do. Thus the person is practicing an adaptive response to the intrusive thought (a celebration-worthy event) rather than being directed to prolong the very unpleasant activity of graphically imagining the harmful action.