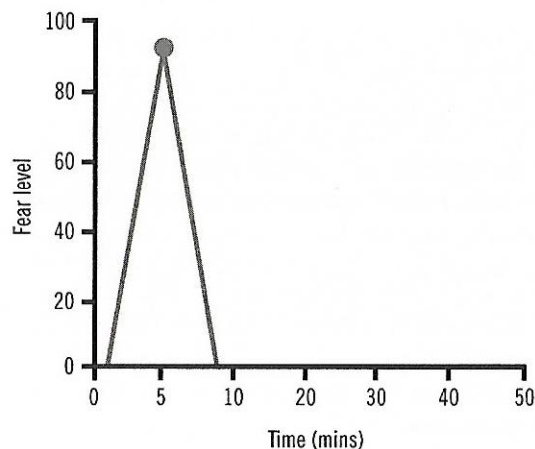


## How does Exposure work?

### The relationship between fear and avoidance

As discussed in Section 2, when we fear something, our bodies produce a hormone called adrenaline into our system and this causes us to experience physical sensations. Over time, however, many people learn that one way to reduce their fear level and stop those unwanted physical sensations is to avoid the situations or objects that cause them to feel that way in the first place. As can be seen below, over time their fear drops.

Effect of avoidance on level of fear



Avoiding the feared situations or objects therefore begins to provide some relief from the unwanted and intense physical sensations. In the longer term this relief from the 'panicky' physical sensations encourages people to keep avoiding the feared situations or objects triggering the panic, and avoidance leads to more avoidance. Over time a pattern of avoidance becomes established. Although this may represent a solution in the short term, whenever the situations or objects causing fear cannot be avoided and need to be faced, the panicky physical sensations kick off again and result in experiencing that fear about fear, and the 'panic cycle' begins again. So avoidance may be helpful in the short term but just maintains the problem in the longer term.

### Breaking the relationship with Exposure

Exposure works by providing the person experiencing the 'panic cycle' with a technique supporting them to gradually expose themselves to the situation or object causing them fear without avoiding it and escaping from it. It does so in a way that is under their control, starting with the situations or objects causing least fear and encouraging them to remain with the physical sensations for long enough for those physical sensations to reduce naturally, without avoiding or escaping from them. Staying with

the fearful situation or object until the physical sensations come down on their own is called 'habituation'. With 'habituation' experienced a number of times, the person learns that the physical sensations representing their 'alarm reaction' will actually disappear on their own if they stay long enough in the situation. Also, as can be seen below, when the Exposure exercise is repeated, the maximum level of fear it causes begins to reduce and habituation is reached in a shorter amount of time.

Eventually, with repeated exposure, the 'alarm reaction' gets turned off, breaking the link between the situation and the object and the experience of the physical sensations, in turn stopping the 'panic cycle'. Over time also, the body begins to get used to the once-feared physical sensations and the 'fear of fear' that once maintained the panic attacks leading to panic disorder reduces.

**Overcoming Fear Through Exposure**

