

Underlying Assumptions and Behavioural Experiments

1b) LINDA had a phobia around flying and her anxiety would spiral into a panic attack. She had this underlying assumption: "If your heart is racing and you are sweating, then you are having a heart attack." She and her therapist developed an alternative underlying assumption: "If your heart is racing and you are sweating, and your heart is healthy, then a racing heart is not dangerous."

| ASSUMPTION TESTED | | <i>If my heart races and I sweat, then it is not dangerous, but instead is probably caused by breathing fast, anxiety, or other factors.</i> | | | |
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| Experiment | Prediction | Possible problems | Strategies to overcome these problems | Outcome of experiment | What have I learned from this experiment about this assumption? |
| <i>In my therapist's office, increase my heart rate by breathing fast.</i> | <i>When I stop breathing fast, my heart rate will return to normal.</i> | <i>I may believe that I am having a heart attack and be too scared to go on.</i> | <i>I will tell my therapist that I think I am having a heart attack and am scared; my therapist will help me evaluate how to proceed.</i> | <i>My heartbeat increased soon after I began breathing fast and returned to normal approximately 10 minutes after I stopped.</i> | <i>My heart can beat fast and not be dangerous or cause a heart attack. I don't need to be as afraid of a rapid heartbeat as I thought.</i> |
| <i>I will imagine myself getting on an airplane, taking off, having a panic attack, and not being able to get off the plane.</i> | <i>My heart rate will increase and I will start to sweat as I am imagining this scene. My heart rate and sweating will return to normal after I stop the imagination exercise.</i> | <i>I might stop this experiment if my heart starts to race too fast. I might start to panic and think I am having a heart attack.</i> | <i>If my heart starts to race really fast, then this is a good chance to test my fears. My therapist will encourage me to stick with the imagination for as long as possible.</i> | <i>My heart rate increased and I started to sweat the more absorbed I became in my imagination. When I stopped imagining, my heart rate returned to normal and I stopped sweating.</i> | <i>A rapid heartbeat can be caused just by thinking about something and feeling scared. When I stop imagining scary thoughts, my heartbeat and sweating go back to normal. It is not dangerous, just uncomfortable.</i> |
| ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTION THAT FITS WITH THE OUTCOME(S) OF MY EXPERIMENT(S) | | <i>My experiments support the assumption that if my heart races and I sweat, then it is not dangerous, but, instead is probably caused by breathing fast, anxiety, or other factors.</i> | | | |

In a second series of experiments, Linda and her therapist decided that she would purposely bring on these symptoms outside the office.