

Interoceptive Exposure Guide

CALM VERITAS · EVIDENCE-BASED WELLNESS

WHY IT WORKS

Anxiety sensitivity — the fear of bodily sensations themselves, not just their cause — keeps panic and anxiety disorders self-reinforcing. Interoceptive exposure deliberately induces sensations like a racing heart, breathlessness, or dizziness in a controlled setting so the brain relearns that the sensation is not dangerous. This is a core component of Barlow's Panic Control Treatment, and controlled trials (Craske & Barlow; Boettcher et al., 2014, Behaviour Research and Therapy) show it reduces fear responses as effectively as full multi-component CBT protocols.

01 · Chair Spins

DIZZINESS / DISORIENTATION

EVIDENCE

Vestibular symptom exposure is a standard component of Barlow's protocol and consistently produces habituation within 3–5 repeated trials in clinical studies of panic disorder.

PROTOCOL

Spin

Sit in an office chair and spin continuously for 60 seconds.

Stop and sit still

Keep eyes open, notice the dizziness without trying to suppress it.

Rate fear

0–10 scale, immediately after stopping.

Repeat

3–5 times, or until peak fear rating drops by half.

02 · Straw Breathing

BREATHLESSNESS / AIR HUNGER

EVIDENCE

Restricted airflow exposure mimics the breathlessness common in panic attacks. Meuret et al.'s CO₂-sensitivity research found repeated controlled exposure reduces fear of respiratory sensations without hyperventilation risk.

PROTOCOL

Breathe through a thin straw

Pinch your nose and breathe only through a coffee stirrer or thin straw for 2 minutes.

Notice air hunger

Let the sensation build without pulling the straw away.

Rate fear

0–10 scale immediately after.

Repeat

3 rounds with 1 minute of normal breathing between.

03 · Stair Stepping

RAPID HEARTBEAT

EVIDENCE

Elevated heart rate is one of the most feared sensations in panic disorder. Brief vigorous exercise as controlled exposure is a standard Barlow protocol item and reliably produces habituation to cardiac sensations over repeated sessions.

PROTOCOL

Step up and down

Use a stair or sturdy step, briskly, for 60 seconds.

Stop and stand still

Notice the racing heartbeat without checking your pulse.

Rate fear

0–10 scale immediately after stopping.

Repeat

3 rounds, resting 1 minute between.

04 · Head Between Knees

LIGHTHEADEDNESS

EVIDENCE

Rapid postural change reliably produces transient lightheadedness. Repeated exposure in clinical trials reduces catastrophic misinterpretation of the sensation as a sign of fainting or a medical emergency.

PROTOCOL

Bend forward

Sit and lower your head between your knees for 30 seconds.

Sit up quickly

Rise to an upright position in one motion.

Rate fear

0–10 scale immediately after.

Repeat

3 times, or until peak fear rating drops by half.

HOW TO USE THIS PROTOCOL

Practice one exercise per session, once or twice daily, for one to two weeks. Rate fear before and after each repetition — the goal is a 50 percent or greater drop in peak fear rating within a session. Do not attempt if you have a heart condition, are pregnant, or have epilepsy without a physician's clearance. This protocol is not a substitute for treatment of diagnosed panic disorder — use it alongside guidance from a licensed therapist.