

Overcoming Needle Phobia

Overcoming any phobia involves facing the situation we are afraid of in order to address the things which maintain our fear such as our thoughts (the ideas and predictions we have) and actions (avoiding or using unhelpful safety behaviours). We do this by changing any unhelpful or inaccurate thinking about the situation, and by using graded exposure to face situations in a controlled and careful manner.

However, we can also use strategies to help us manage a needle phobia. These can be particularly helpful in situations where we might need to have a needle or injection quite soon. They can also be integrated as we start changing our thinking and reducing avoidance behaviours. It's important to remember that the techniques described below are designed to give us a sense that we can cope with the anxiety experience, rather than avoid or prevent anxiety

Applied muscle tension

If you have fainted previously or are afraid of fainting, applied muscle tension is an easy strategy to help prevent the drop in blood pressure associated with fainting. Applied muscle tension involves tensing and holding the large muscles in your body (arms, legs, and torso) in order to temporarily increase your blood pressure.

The first step is to practice this at home. Sit and hold muscle tension for around 15 seconds or until you feel warm or experience a rush in your head. Once done, relax and let your muscles go for at least 30 seconds. Repeat this five times over, twice a day. If you have a history of fainting, you can also practice this in situations where you may experience your warning signs of fainting, such as feeling light-headed or nauseous. For example, try sitting with your head below your knees for 30 seconds, then sit up quickly. This will give you good practice at implementing applied muscle tension when you notice early signs of fainting.



Mindfulness of physical sensations

Mindfulness is the ability to observe and be present in our experiences without judging or evaluating them. It can be a useful tool to help us sit with our anxiety, especially when we are experiencing intense physical

sensations. Our aim is to sit with and tolerate our emotions and physical sensations, rather than get rid of them. This might sound like noticing and describing it to yourself "There's nausea, my stomach is turning" "I can feel my heart rate thumping in my chest and the front of my ears". We can also use it to help tolerate pain, such as what might be experienced when we have an injection. By directing our attention to the present moment and describing it without judgement, mindfulness can help us stay in the situation without escaping or adding to our distress.

Addressing unhelpful thinking

Sometimes the beliefs and predictions we have are inaccurate or unhelpful. They may be based on outdated information, or may be biased due to past negative experiences. If you identify any negative predictions that add to your fear, you can investigate the evidence for and against that idea. Make sure to look for unbiased, objective facts that would support it (or not). You could do this by asking qualified people, researching on the internet (making sure to stick to reliable sources – see CCI 'Dealing With Health Information' information sheet), surveying others, or simply evaluating it based on information you already know but may not be taking into account.



For example, some people are fearful that a needle will slip and go into the bone. In this case, they could talk to their doctor or medical professional about the rates and likelihood of this happening, and the likely outcomes if this were to happen. They could also survey people they know, or the nurses in their medical practice, to find out how often it has happened.

Others may identify more broad or generalised concerns such as "It will be really bad". If you can, it is still helpful to collect information about the procedure so you have as accurate idea as possible. You can also discuss this with a medical professional. Some concerns may centre around our ability to cope, or the likelihood of fainting. By practising applied muscle tension and mindfulness, you may find that you feel more able to cope or prevent fainting already. You could also investigate the risks of fainting using the above methods. In all cases, try to find a more balanced conclusion or idea, so that you have alternative and more helpful ways to think about the situation.

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Graded exposure

The key strategy to overcome needle phobia is exposure. Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to “jump in the deep end” and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it “step by step”, what we call graded exposure. By using graded exposure you start with situations or tasks that are easier for you to manage, then work your way up to more challenging tasks. This allows you to build your confidence slowly, to use other skills you have learned, to get used to the situations, to get used to feeling anxiety and noticing it subside, and to challenge your fears about each exposure exercise. By doing this in a structured and repeated way, you have a good chance of reducing your anxiety about those situations.

To develop a graded exposure plan – often called a hierarchy – list a range of activities or tasks and rank them based on how distressing they are from 0-100.

You can incorporate a wide range of activities – anything that elicits some anxiety. It is helpful to be as specific and detailed as possible about **who** will be there, **what** you will be doing, **when** you will do it, **where** you will do it and **why** it is relevant. Here is an example of a graded exposure plan for overcoming needle phobia:

Task	Distress (0-100)
Look at a cartoon drawing of a needle	30
Look at a still photo of a needle	40
Watch a video of a needle being held/moved around	45
Look at a real needle	55
Look at a photo of needle going into skin	60
Holding a real needle with cap on	65
Use a needle to inject an orange	70
Watch a video of someone having blood taken	75
Watch someone else get an injection	80
Getting blood taken, with numbing cream	85
Getting blood taken, without numbing cream	95
Getting an immunisation needle	100

You might include a helper such as a friend to encourage you and give practical support. It can also be helpful to discuss your plan with your doctor or healthcare professional, so they can arrange items or procedures as necessary. All support people should also know what *not* to do, i.e. not to accidentally encourage unhelpful coping or avoidance.

Graded exposure tips

Here are some useful tips to keep in mind as you work through your graded exposure plan:

1. Expect some anxiety. You'll probably experience some anxiety or discomfort taking any of the steps on your plan. Start small, and work your way up.
2. Use your skills. Use your applied muscle tension and mindfulness and challenge negative thoughts that you might have.
3. Stay in the situation. While it might be tempting to stop or leave if you feel uncomfortable, try to stay in the situation until it's finished or the anxiety goes down. In this way you can see that, as frightening as the feelings are, they are not dangerous, and they do subside.
4. One step at a time. Climbing a stepladder is not about taking one giant leap, it's about taking one small step at a time. You begin with the least difficult step and gradually work your way up the step ladder getting used to the anxiety you feel at each step.
5. Over and over again. Do a step frequently and repeatedly, and try to do them in close succession to make sure you are comfortable with the situation before you move onto the next step. This might take 3 or 4 times.
6. Acknowledge the steps you've made. When you are comfortable with a particular step, give yourself credit for the steps that you've taken so far.
7. Step-backs. We all have our up and down days, and sometimes you might think you've taken a 'step-back' because the step on your exposure plan didn't go as well as you hoped. If you are having difficulties with a particular step then it might be useful to take a "step back" and work on the previous step again or design an "in between" step between the one you've completed and the difficult one.

