What is *in vivo* exposure?

Getting anxious can be unpleasant and distressing. As a result, people with PTSD and other anxiety disorders often learn to anticipate activities or situations that are likely to trigger distressing memories, fear, and anxiety. In an effort to avoid these unpleasant experiences, the person begins to avoid these trigger situations. Unfortunately, the more we avoid situations or activities, the more those situations are likely to make us anxious.

The problem with avoidance is that it only brings temporary relief. In practice, the things we avoid become harder and harder to do, and gradually we avoid more and more things.

Our lifestyle may be seriously curtailed by a tendency to avoid stressful situations or escaping them wherever possible. This might include:

- Not going out
- Not going to work
- Not meeting people
- Not using public transport
- Not being able to do the shopping
- Not being able to stand up for oneself

By avoiding situations we reduce our quality of life. However, we know that if you are able to remain in a stressful situation – to confront what you are frightened of – your anxiety levels will eventually reduce. If you always leave a stressful situation quickly, you will never find out that your anxiety will gradually die away of its own accord.

In vivo exposure is designed to help you gradually face situations that you currently avoid or which cause significant anxiety. *In vivo* exposure consists of six steps:

1. Constructing a list of feared situations and ranking them in order of difficulty with the most frightening at the top
2. Choosing a target situation from low on the list to start work on
3. Defining a clear goal from your chosen situation: exactly what do you want to do?
4. Breaking your goal down into a hierarchy of small manageable steps; this may include, for example, doing it initially with a trusted friend and later on your own, or going half way there at first, then all the way
5. Repeatedly confronting the chosen step in your hierarchy, trying hard to stay there until the anxiety comes down
6. When you can confront that step with only minimal anxiety, moving on to the next one on your list; you will gradually progress up the list until you are able to confront your most feared situation

On the following pages are two monitoring forms. The first is a detailed record of each *in vivo* exposure session and the second is a summary sheet to record your progress in *in vivo* exposure sessions over time.

Detailed record of *in vivo* exposure session
(complete one form for each *in vivo* exposure session)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Situation: _____

_____

_____

_____ Expected SUDS: /100

BEFORE
Time Commenced: _____ Initial SUDS: /100

What do you predict will happen in the situation?

_____

_____

PEAK
Highest SUDS: /100

AFTER
Time Finished: _____ Final SUDS: /100

Did your predictions come true?

_____

_____

Additional Problems/Comments:

_____

_____

Summary of home-based exposure sessions

(complete one line for each exposure session)

Date	Start time	Finish time	Activity	Highest SUDS	End SUDS	Comments