


# Systematic Desensitization



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# Systematic Desensitization

- consistently proven to be effective in the treatment of anxiety and phobias
- events which cause anxiety are recalled in imagination
- then a relaxation technique is used to dissipate the anxiety
- with sufficient repetition through practice, the imagined event loses its anxiety-provoking power
- shown to be effective when self-administered as well

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# Background

- Based on I. P. Pavlov's concept of *classical conditioning*.
- an *unconditioned stimulus* (food) leads to an *unconditioned response* (salivation),
- a *conditioned stimulus* (light or bell), when paired consistently with the unconditioned stimulus (food) leads to a *conditioned response* (salivation) similar to the unconditioned response (salivation).

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**Counterconditioning**

- *Counterconditioning* - reducing a conditioned response (anxiety, for example) by establishing an *incompatible response* (relaxation) to the same conditioned stimulus (a snake, for example).

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**Counterconditioning**

- Wolpe developed a treatment program for anxiety that was based on the principles of counterconditioning.
- anxiety symptoms could be reduced (or *inhibited*) when the stimuli to the anxiety were presented in a graded order and systematically paired with a relaxation response-- *systematic desensitization*.

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**Counterconditioning**

- Many researchers have since concluded that “exposure” to the feared object or situation is the critical factor in treatment. Systematic desensitization, some say, merely helps individuals expose themselves to feared situations

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### Critical Evaluation of Systematic Desensitization

- Research has shown that systematic desensitization can be effective for any **phobia**, with the following considerations:
- more effective for Specific Phobias than for disorders involving “free-floating” anxiety, such as Social Phobia or Agoraphobia

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### Critical Evaluation of Systematic Desensitization

- Successful outcome of systematic desensitization is more likely when skill deficits are not causing the anxiety. That is, if you develop anxiety about taking exams in school, and if you have a tendency not to study or do your homework, your anxiety is probably the result of not knowing the material; systematic desensitization may not be of much help in such a case. But if you know the material “backwards and forwards” and develop anxiety, then systematic desensitization might be used to desensitize yourself to performance fears.

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### Critical Evaluation of Systematic Desensitization

- effectiveness does not appear to depend on the *intensity* of your anxiety, the *duration* of your anxiety, or on whether the anxiety was acquired *suddenly or gradually*
- may not be as effective in treating anxieties which could have an underlying evolutionary survival component—such as fear of the dark, fear of heights, or fear of dangerous animals—as in treating phobias that have been acquired from personal experience.

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## *Procedures for Systematic Desensitization*

- There are three steps in the systematic desensitization procedure:
  1. Relaxation;
  2. Constructing an anxiety hierarchy;
  3. Pairing relaxation with the situations described in your anxiety hierarchy.

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## *Step One: Relaxation*

- This could be **Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Autogenics**, or any other method of inducing a deeply relaxed state of mind.

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## *Step Two: Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy Overview: Example-- Fear of Flying*

- Items included in an anxiety hierarchy describe situations which produce varying levels of anxiety, some more worrisome than others

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**Step Two:**  
*Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy*

*Overview: Example-- Fear of Flying*

- Describe the items on your anxiety hierarchy in sufficient detail to enable you to vividly imagine each one. It might be sufficient to say, "Standing in line at the ticket counter," but saying, "Standing in a long line at the crowded ticket counter, with nothing to do but wait to get my luggage checked," might be more graphic.

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**Step Two:**  
*Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy*

*Overview: Example-- Fear of Flying*

- Items are most effective if they can help you experience the event in your imagination, not just describe it.

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**Step Two:**  
*Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy*

- Attempt to create about 16 or 17 situations at the beginning. Most people tend to discard some items in the sorting process, so you can expect to end up with about 10 to 15 items in your final hierarchy. To aid in sorting the items, write each one on a separate index card.

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**Step Two:**  
**Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy**

- The situations or scenes in your hierarchy should represent a fairly well-spaced progression of anxiety.
- Grade the anxiety of each item by assigning it a number on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the highest level of anxiety imaginable and 0 is no anxiety (complete relaxation). Write this number on the back of the index card for the item being graded.

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**Step Two: Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy**  
*When each item has an anxiety grade, sort the cards into 5 piles. Each pile will represent a different category of anxiety, as follows:*

<u>Pile</u>	<u>Anxiety Grade</u>
Low Anxiety	1-19
Medium Low Anxiety	20-39
Medium Anxiety	40-59
Medium High Anxiety	60-79
High Anxiety	80-100

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**Step Two:**  
**Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy**

- Goal here is to end up with at least two items in each pile.
- When you have finished, combine all the cards into one pile that is ordered from lowest to highest anxiety.
- Set the cards aside for one day.
- It helps to check the accuracy of your ordering by shuffling the cards the next day or so. Without looking at the grades on the back of the cards, re-order them. Then check the grades to see if your second ordering is the same as the first. If not, make some adjustments.

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**Step Two: Creating the Anxiety Hierarchy**  
**Sample Fear of Flying Anxiety Hierarchy**  
*Note any item's relative anxiety level does not necessarily relate to its temporal sequence*

- Packing luggage
- Making reservations
- Driving to the airport
- Realizing you have to make a flight
- Checking in
- Boarding the plane
- Waiting for boarding
- Taxiing
- In-flight service
- Moving around the cabin
- Climbing to cruising altitude
- Descending
- Waiting for departure
- Taking off
- Landing
- Turbulence

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**Step Three:**  
**Pairing Relaxation With the Situations From Your Anxiety Hierarchy**

- The overall goal of systematic desensitization is to reduce the ability of certain situations to cause anxiety. You will accomplish this by confronting each item of your anxiety hierarchy while you are in a deep state of relaxation.

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**Step Three:**  
**Pairing Relaxation With the Situations From Your Anxiety Hierarchy**

*When you are desensitizing high anxiety items, repeat one cycle of the desensitization process after you have reached a level without anxiety, just to reinforce your ability to relax in that situation.*

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**Step Three:**  
*Pairing Relaxation With the Situations From Your Anxiety Hierarchy*

- Practice systematic desensitization in the same environment you use to practice relaxation.
- Your systematic desensitization sessions *should not exceed 30 minutes*.
- Also, you should not attempt to desensitize yourself or your client to *more than three anxiety hierarchy items per session*.

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**Step Three:**  
*Pairing Relaxation With the Situations From Your Anxiety Hierarchy*

- Each session (except the very first one, of course) should begin with *the last item from your previous session*. If the last item was successfully desensitized, then you should review it in the next session, and if it was not successfully desensitized, then you should begin with it in the next session.
- Progress will depend on how many times a week you practice. Once a day five times a week would be admirable; two times a week would be average.

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Consider this plan for an anxiety hierarchy consisting of 15 items:

<u>Session</u>	<u>Item Number</u>
1	1-3
2	3-5
3	5-7
4	7-9
5	9-11
6	11-13
7	13-15

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Consider this plan for an anxiety hierarchy consisting of 15 items:

- Using a schedule of two sessions per week, you will complete the desensitization plan in about 3½ weeks.
- Using a schedule of five sessions per week, you will complete the desensitization plan in about 1½ weeks.

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### *The Systematic Desensitization Procedure*

- *Step 1.* Induce relaxation using your preferred relaxation technique.
- *Step 2.* Read the appropriate item from your hierarchy. (In the first session, this will be the first item in the hierarchy. In all other sessions, this will be the last item from the previous session.)

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### *The Systematic Desensitization Procedure*

- *Step 3.* Imagine yourself in the situation for a tolerable time.
- *Note.* The length of “a tolerable time” will vary. Be careful of overloading on the first encounter with an item, especially with high anxiety items. Although it might seem a short time, 10 seconds of imaginary exposure might be all you/ the client can tolerate. Slowly increase the amount of time you imagine the situation on subsequent presentations until you can tolerate at least 30 seconds of exposure.

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*The Systematic  
Desensitization Procedure*

- *Step 4.* Stop imagining the situation and determine the level of anxiety that you are experiencing (on a 0–100 scale). Re-establish your relaxation again and relax for about 30 seconds.
- *Step 5.* Re-read the description of the situation. Imagine yourself in the scene for a tolerable time.

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*The Systematic  
Desensitization Procedure*

- *Step 6.* Stop and again determine your level of anxiety. If you are experiencing any anxiety, return to Step 2. If you feel no anxiety, go on to Step 7.
- *Step 7.* Move on to the next item of your hierarchy. Repeat the above procedure for this next item, beginning with Step 1.

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*The Systematic  
Desensitization Procedure*

- End each session with several minutes of relaxation.
- It may be helpful to make a set of index cards with an abbreviated set of instructions for each step of the desensitization procedure. Use one step per card.

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## The Systematic Desensitization Procedure

<u>Card</u>	<u>Abbreviated Instructions</u>
1	Relax.
2	Read the anxiety situation.
3	Imagine the situation for a tolerable time.
4	Stop. Determine your anxiety level. Re-establish relaxation.
5	Re-read the anxiety situation. Imagine the situation for a tolerable time.
6	Stop. Determine your anxiety level. If anxiety is present, return to Card 2. If no anxiety, go to Card 7.
7	Next item. Return to Card 1.

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## Potential Problems

- You might experience no anxiety at the presentation of an item.
- You might be unable to decrease a high level of anxiety even after numerous cycles.

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### **Problem 1:**

***Little or no anxiety is produced on the first or second cycle of an anxiety hierarchy item.***

Cause: The situation is not being imagined vividly enough.

Solution: Describe the situation in greater detail. *or* Imagine the scene for a longer period of time.

Cause: The situation induces a lower level of anxiety than a previous item.

Solution: Describe the situation in greater detail. *or* Eliminate this item.

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**Problem 2:**  
***A high level of anxiety persists after numerous cycles.***

Cause: The situation has not been placed in the appropriate order in your hierarchy.

Solution: Develop a new item to be placed before this item. *Or* Place this item later in your hierarchy.

Cause: The situation is so embellished that it contains elements of scenes later in your hierarchy.

Solution: Rewrite the description of this item.

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**Problem 2:**  
***A high level of anxiety persists after numerous cycles.***

Cause : You are focusing on a scene too long for the intensity of anxiety it has the power to produce.

Solution: Decrease the amount of time imagining the scene.  
*or*  
Rewrite the item to break it into two new items.

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***In Vivo Contacts***

- Long-term success in overcoming a fear of flying depends on taking an actual flight (in vivo) after treatment is complete.
- Practice relaxation technique on a daily basis and also improvise short desensitization sessions as needed.

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