Treating Social phobia Using the Find a Five Technique

The most commonly used technique in treating phobias and anxiety is called exposure therapy. Exposure works by gradually exposing the person with the fear to more and more frightening situations in a safe and controlled environment, thereby showing them that there is nothing to fear about the situation. Exposure to the feared situation almost always leads to reduction in fear.

Our unique version of exposure, which we have termed "Find a Five", is designed to allow clients to confront their fears in smaller and more manageable doses. Find a Five gives the client total control over the exposure process and makes it into a positively-focused, confidence-building journey in which every attempt is a "win". This is the safest way we have found to conduct exposure exercises and has been highly successful in treating anxiety and phobias of all kinds.

Find a 5- Background

The Fear Scale

Imagine all the situations you fear ranked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the scariest. In the case of social anxiety a 1 out of 10 could, for example, be talking to someone you know on the phone-something that barely causes any fear. A 10 could be something extremely frightening like getting up in front of the whole class to give a presentation.

 If we are in a situation where our anxiety is 10 out of 10 in intensity level then our brain goes into "panic" mode and all your logic and decision-making abilities are switched off and all you can think about is getting away. This response is controlled by the most basic parts of our brain and cannot be overridden.

We do not want to engage in exposure exercises at a 10 out of 10 level. This is not a good way of reducing your fear of something! This could end up making the fear worse.

At the other end of the scale, using a fear level of 1 out of 10 to treat anxiety would be a painfully slow process. You would never be exposed to enough fear to make any meaningful progress.

Finding the Middle Ground

In the Find a Five program, we are aiming for the middle ground. Our goal is to consciously and continuously try to stay in the 5 out of 10 fear range when we are conducting exposures. That way we won't trigger the full blown panic response and can work on exposure to a significant-but manageable-level of fear.

In practical terms this means confronting your fears, but only facing them until you feel a 5 out of 10 level of fear. If picking up the phone to call someone or spending a few moments in a room full of people you don't know causes you to feel this "middle ground" level of fear then you end the exercise and leave as soon as you hit this level. It doesn't matter what exactly causes you to feel a 5 out of 10- all that matters is that you keep hitting this level of fear each time you try.

It can be often hard to predict what a 5 out of 10 will be ahead of time. If you are afraid of being around people, your may think that just sitting in a classroom would produce a 5 out of 10 level of fear, but this may not always be the case.

Your anxiety will also vary on a particular day depending on how you are feeling, how well you slept that night, what else you are thinking about and a number of other factors. On one particular day you might find that taking one step towards the school canteen feels about a 5 out of 10 level of anxiety, on the next day you might be able to enter the room before reaching a 5 out of 10. On the third day you might

get halfway towards the canteen before reaching a 5 out of 10 and on the fourth day only a few steps away before reaching a 5.

Every Exercise is a Win

Progress will not be in a straight line. What's important is reaching your 5 out of 10 level each time you practice, no matter what that looks like compared to other days. The "result" in practical terms is not what we are focusing on- it is the mental effort of facing your fear until it reaches a 5 that will help you overcome your fear. We are reframing the whole process so that you can be in total control, and so long as you continue to reach a 5 out of 10 you continue to "win" each time you engage with exposure.

In our model of exposure you succeed equally wherever you reached a 5. In this way, each and every exposure is building your self-esteem and confidence, and your belief that you can overcome your anxiety. You are taking charge of the level of anxiety you are trying to experience in each exposure exercise. By repeatedly finding a 5 you will see your fear reduce until you can do more and more different things before reaching a 5 out of 10 fear level.

The Find a 5 Fear and Performance Graph

Let's look at a graph of how we can make sense of this:
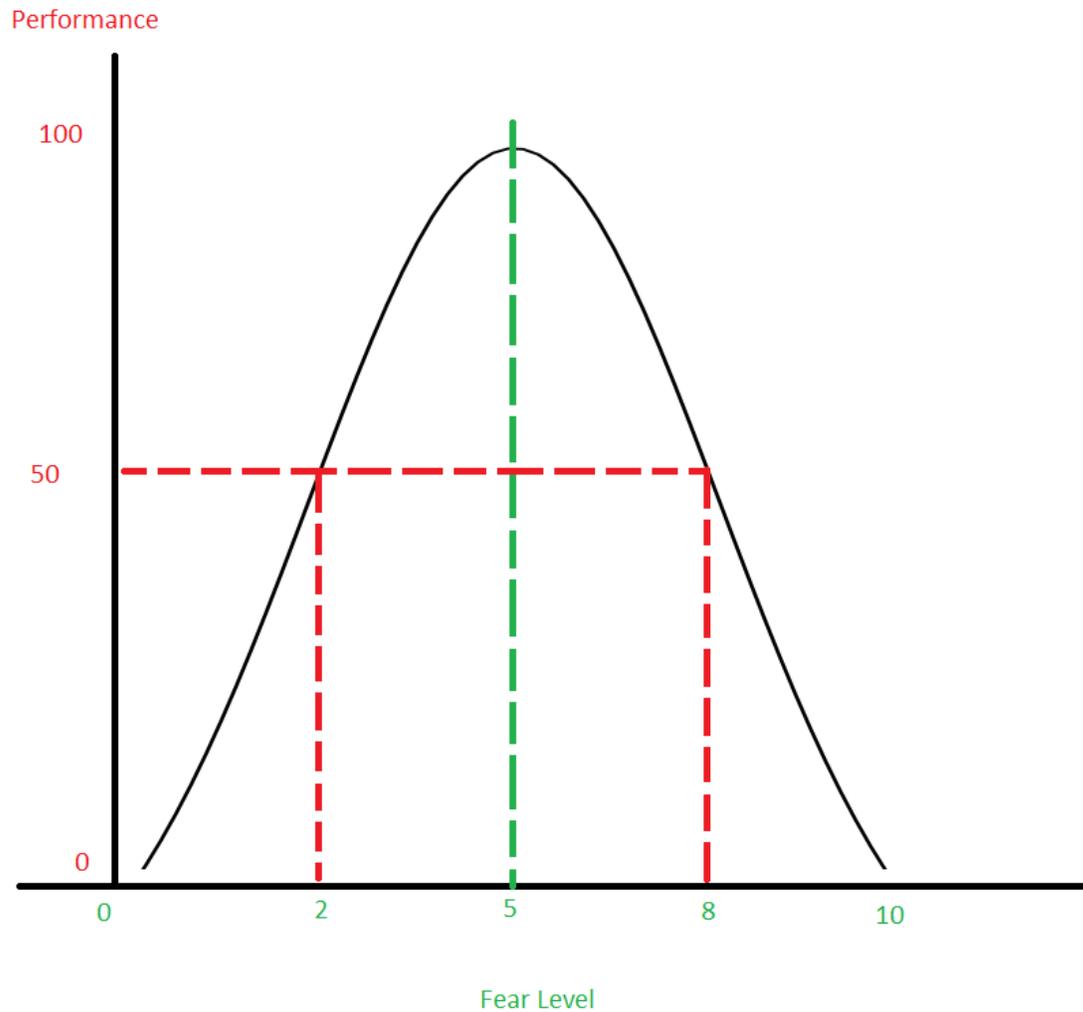
If you look at the graph it shows the level of anxiety on the horizontal axis represented on a scale of 0 to 10 with 5 shown in the centre. On the vertical axis is what we have labelled "performance" on a scale of 0 to 100. This refers to how "well" you are doing in confronting the fear - how long you are able to remain in your state of fear and how effective the exercise is in reducing your fear. As you can see by the graph, in our find a five model the highest level of performance will be achieved at approximately a 5 out of 10 level of anxiety. This is denoted by the green dotted line on the graph. 5 out of 10 is where we have one foot in the comfort zone and one foot outside of it - it's the ideal place to confront a significant amount of fear without being totally overwhelmed.

If you look at the 50 mark on the performance axis, it corresponds to either a 2 out of 10 level of anxiety or an 8 out of 10 level of anxiety. Not engaging with your fear at a high enough level leads to a lower level of success, and so does engaging with too strong a level of fear. Both are unhelpful.

Speed vs Sustainability- Driving Analogy

Let's look at an analogy to make more sense of this. Imagine you are going for a big long drive between two cities roughly 1000km apart, such as Sydney and Melbourne, or from New York City to Chicago, or Paris to Berlin. Three people leave their home city on this 1000 km journey. One driver is driving at the speed limit of 110 km an hour, which we will equate to our 5 out of 10 level of anxiety on the graph. The second driver sets off at 250km an hour on the same journey and we will equate that to an 8 out of 10 level of anxiety on the graph. Our third driver sets out at 4 km an hour which will equate to our 2 out of 10 level of anxiety. An hour into the journey our second driver is potentially going to be way ahead at 250km an hour but very soon he will be pulled over to the side of the road, either by the police or because some major engine component has been over stressed and broken. Our first driver at 110 km an hour will probably make the journey in a solid 10 to 12 hours with breaks. Still a challenging journey but not necessarily overwhelming, especially as he is really motivated to get to his destination, so he feels the relatively long journey is all worthwhile, and his car arrives in good shape. Our third driver travelling at 4km an hour is very unlikely to tax any of the major components of the car but it will take him 250 hours to get there or nearly 24 days travelling at 10 hours a day! All three drivers will eventually reach their destination (well our 250km an hour driver might need to find a new car!), but driver one is using the optimal balance between speed and sustainability.

Many of our clients have thought in the past that if they are engaging in activities at 5 out of 10, surely doing it at 8 out of 10 will get them to their "destination" of curing their fears more quickly. You

might like this idea of "pushing yourself further" but it won't help you overcome your fears any more quickly. If anything it will end up setting you back as you end up over-stretching yourself and expose yourself to too much, too soon. No, 5 out of 10 is the top mark you can get in the exam. If you try to go to 8 it is like staying up all night to study for an exam when you already know everything there is to know - it might make you *think* you're more prepared but in reality it will hurt your performance as you'll be making yourself more stressed and exhausted without actually increasing your knowledge at all.

Summary

Hopefully you can see from the examples above that it is not the actual progress that is important with the find a 5 model. It does not matter how far you get when engaging with your fear each time, as long as you reach that 5 out of 10 level. The exercise is just as successful whether you reach a 5 having been talking to a group of people for ten minutes or if you left the room after only a few moments. If you look at exposure exercises in this way then you get to "win" every time you do it, and you will begin to trust yourself in that you will always have control over when you stop.