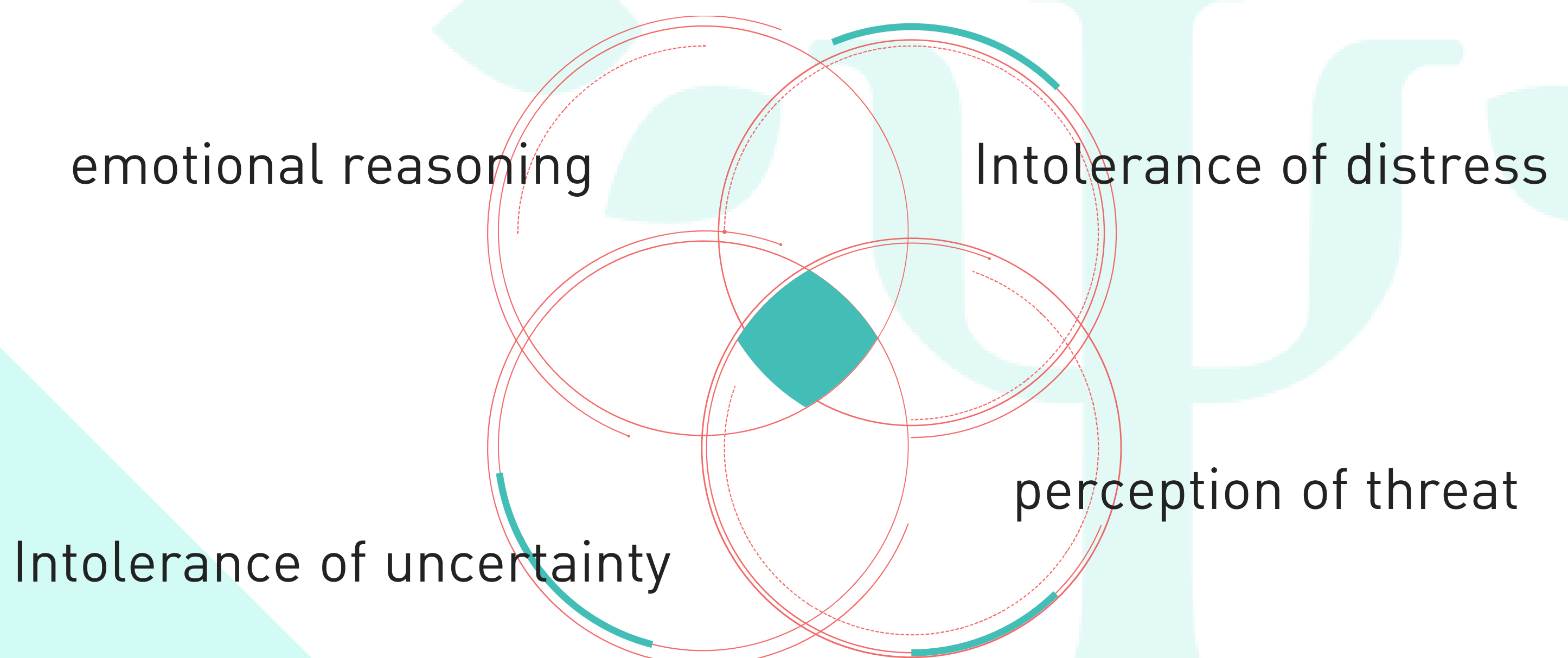


Understanding Anxiety Disorders

A mental health diagnosis is important in order to guide treatment because specific treatments have been shown to be effective with a particular cluster of symptoms (diagnoses). In order to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder one must demonstrate that the symptoms of anxiety impairs their functioning in some way, and causes significant distress.

Most Anxiety Disorders have similar key characteristics:

- ★ Intolerance of uncertainty: significant difficulty not being able to know with certainty the future or potential outcome of many anticipated and imagined events.
- ★ Intolerance of distress: minimal ability to tolerate any feeling of anxiety or stress.
- ★ The perception of threat; not actual danger: Displaying cognitive and physical symptoms of fear despite no actual danger being present.
- ★ Future oriented thinking: Thoughts focus on the “what if’s” of the future. This makes it impossible to fix any current problems because none actually exist at the moment.
- ★ Emotional reasoning: Belief that “If it feels bad, it must be true” or using your emotions as evidence that something bad is happening



5 myths/truths about Exposure Response Prevention (ERP)

1 MYTH: Exposure therapy is only for phobias.

TRUTH: ERP is also the most well established and researched therapeutic intervention for Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, OCD, PTSD

2 MYTH: Exposure therapy is dangerous

TRUTH: Anxiety disorders are hinged on the fear and perception of threat when there is no actual danger. ERP systemically and incrementally exposes an individual to the feeling of anxiety (something they already feel) which allows them to learn that no danger actually occurs.

3 MYTH: Exposure therapy doesn't get to the route of the problem

TRUTH: ERP is based on the hypothesis that anxiety disorders are developed and maintained through the association of anxiety with a specific stimulus. ERP helps us unlearn this association by exposing someone to the experience of anxiety without the stimulus of successful avoidance and coping.

4 MYTH: Exposure therapy is just doing something scary. Can't I do that by myself?

TRUTH: Many individuals endure tons of distress while continuing to do the thing they fear. They do so, however, hoping the anxiety will go away and often use safety behaviors to mitigate or protect themselves from experiencing the full feeling of anxiety. This adds to feelings of demoralization and hopelessness. ERP helps individuals identify these safety behaviors and incrementally seek the experience of anxiety without certain safety measures. When the perceived danger doesn't occur the individual can feel confident it was because their anxiety subsided and not the result of luck or their safety behaviors.

5 MYTH: ERP can not work for trauma. You could re-traumatize someone.

TRUTH: The diagnosis of PTSD following a trauma is based on symptoms of unwanted thoughts related to the trauma, nightmares, flashbacks, and a state of hyper vigilance. Individuals with PTSD, by the nature of the diagnosis, are already experiencing the anxiety associated with the traumatic thoughts. They also utilize avoidance coping to not feel the anxiety which reduces their tolerance of the thoughts/anxiety and conditions the brain to fear and avoid the thoughts. ERP helps build tolerance to these thoughts and empowers individuals to not fear their thoughts & emotions.

5-behaviors to be more socially confident

When we worry about looking foolish in front of others or fear that others will be critical of us we behave in lots of different ways. We avoid interactions, seek reassurance, and create “safe” ways of interacting with others.

Below are 5-behaviors you can practice despite feeling afraid and anxious.

Remember, we can practice being confident even when we don't feel like it in order for our brain and emotions to catch up.

- 1 Pay attention to your posture (sit up, walk tall, and hold our head up)
- 2 Make brief eye-contact with as many strangers as you can. Make a point of trying to connect eyes with individuals walking down the street, the gas attendant, grocery store employees, and folks in your coffee shop. You have to practice this on purpose as much as possible.
- 3 Expect to feel uncomfortable. Your brain associates many of interactions with feelings of embarrassment, worry, and physical feelings of anxiety (i.e., hot, sweaty, blushing). If you feel anxious it means your practice is working!
 - Remember, feeling anxious is NOT evidence that you are performing poorly socially. Accept that you will feel bad at times and accept this discomfort to build your confidence.
- 4 If you're typically avoidant of others when in social situations, attempt to notice something about everyone you pass by and interact with, or speak with (For example, “That person is wearing glasses” “Her name tag says Jessica’ or, “He has a white dog.”
- 5 Practice makes permanent. Change your approach from “bumping into your anxiety” to seeking it out. If you do not typically have many organic opportunities to interact with others, you have to create them.

5-things I can do to survive a panic attack without running away

The experience of panic is our body reacting to the anticipation of danger. This can happen even when we don't feel scared or stressed. Once this happens we become very sensitive to it occurring again and believe (worry) that the next panic attack may be the worst one.

The fear of the next attack makes us want to protect ourselves from it ever happening again. We start to avoid things we associate with the panic, or the physical feelings that remind us of the panic.

What can I do?

- 1 Remember that panic is very, very scary but NOT dangerous.
- 2 When you notice the feelings coming try not to react...in any way (by reacting or changing your behavior you are telling your brain that there may be danger).
- 3 Once the feelings are here pay attention to the time. Look at a clock and make a mental note or write down the time.
- 4 Recognize each physical symptom by noticing them as they occur (i.e., "My heart rate is picking up, my stomach is twisting, my chest feels tight").
- 5 Notice the time and write it down again when your symptoms start to subside.
 - It never lasts as long as you think.
 - We know that your symptoms will go away because once your brain figures out it is not in danger it turns on the body's symptom that calms us and conserves energy.

Fighting your panic is a paradox. You've already tried to run from it. You've tried to prevent it, and you've likely changed your life in hope you never have to experience it again. These strategies are not working and it's time to try something new. Once you are no longer afraid of the symptoms you can build tolerance to the feelings...then you will stop worrying about them and they will reduce in frequency.

When your fear it, you'll bump into it everywhere you go.