

Planned Outings: How to Practice

1) How often should I do planned outings?

The more you practice, the more progress you will make. Plan to practice at least four days per week, if possible.

Planning ahead is the best way to have a successful practice program. People who don't plan tend to do their practices when they find the time and energy. Can you guess what happens?

So, plan your practices for a specific time, just like scheduling an appointment. This way, you don't have a daily debate with yourself about when or even whether to practice.

How do you usually keep track of your appointments? Do you use a smartphone calendar or other tool? Paper calendars and day-planners also work great.

Here is a tip for planning your practice outings: be flexible. When important items come up that take precedence, that's fine. But here's a great tip: when you cancel an appointment for a practice, make sure to reschedule it *right then* on your calendar. This way, you are being flexible, but you are taking advantage of the overall strategy of planning your outings, which are essential for your recovery.

When I was working on my recovery, I found that my best strategy was to plan my outings for early in the day. There was less of a chance that something would come up during the day that could derail my plans for my recovery work. There is also recent research that shows that we might get a bit more benefit from outings we do early in the day.

2) How challenging should my planned outings be?

One of the keys to recovery is giving ourselves permission to take small steps.

We want to have a balance between being patient and gentle with ourselves as we build our confidence and courage to face our fears. Patience and gentleness means giving ourselves permission to do small steps as we build our willingness to do more challenging outings.

3) Use repetition and variety to help you make progress in your recovery.

Repetition is a very powerful part of practicing. We learn through repetition. During my recovery work, I would often do the same outing on consecutive days. It was great for my morale to see how my anxiety came down, simply by repeating the identical outing. It gave me a sense of mastery, and really motivated me to keep up my practicing.

Variety is also important to the learning process. Varying our planned outings is another way to build confidence and mastery.

4) Have a specific plan for your outing, so that *you* are in charge, not the anxiety

Do the practice so that *you* are in charge, *not* the anxiety.

The best strategy is to do the outing you have planned, regardless of what anxiety does.

When we do a vague practice such as “I’ll go until I feel too anxious,” we are putting the anxiety in charge.

Practice *with anxiety*, not *until anxiety*.

Doing an outing with anxiety is actually very helpful for recovery. It helps you to learn the two most important things:

1. Panic cannot hurt me
2. I can cope with any experience of anxiety or panic, without any crutches.

On the other hand, during an outing, if you find it’s quite easy and you really want to do more than you had planned, see if you can restrain your enthusiasm. Doing specifically what you had planned is the habit you want to nurture. If you can’t wait to do more, enjoy your success and self-confidence, and channel your enthusiasm to your next planned outing!

5) Bring the qualities of “allowing” and “curiosity” to the practice

Just before starting your outing, ask yourself:

In order to make progress, am I willing to practice “A” for allow and “C” for curious observer?
Can I see this outing as an opportunity to learn?

6) Take advantage of anxiety and panic

You’re supposed to experience anxiety during your practices, otherwise there would be no need to do them!

Oftentimes, anxiety increases at first, because you are doing things you have been avoiding.
With repetition, your anxiety will decrease.

If you have a panic experience, that is a precious opportunity to practice “A” for allow and “C” for curious observer, and perhaps other tools as well. This can be a tremendously valuable experience. Use the opportunity wisely, because a panic experience lasts only a short time. There is a small “window of opportunity” to use the tools that will help you make the most progress.

7) Take your time

Let's suppose you're doing a practice on your own without any safety objects. Here are two ways of doing the practice. See which one you think is the most valuable:

1. Racing through the practice, getting it done as quickly as possible, keeping your body tensed, with your eyes fixed straight ahead, hoping you'll make it to the end without having panic.
2. Taking your time with the practice, doing the activity slowly and deliberately, taking in the experience, looking at the people, places and things, and using your tools when anxiety comes up.

Which of these options do you think is the best way to practice?

Option #1 uses a number of safety behaviors: racing through the practice, keeping your body tense, keeping your eyes fixed straight ahead. Doing your practices this way actually slows down recovery.

Option #2, where you are really taking your time, is a great exposure practice. You are getting the most benefit for your efforts.

8) Should I practice on a "bad day"?

We've talked about the importance of planning your practices and making appointments with yourself to do them. But what if you're having a bad day? What if you feel really tired that day? Or what if you have a cold?

These are important questions. What do you think the answers are? Do you think you should practice only on days that you feel good and well-rested?

What do you think would happen with recovery from agoraphobia if you only did outings when you were having a good day? If you always take it easy on a bad day, does that help with recovery?

When I was recovering, it was hard for me to deal with these questions. I really didn't like my therapist's answers! He said that I should practice even on days that I didn't feel good, even when I felt tired, even when I had a cold! I thought my therapist was being very cold and unsympathetic. But guess what? He was right.

If we can do practices under any conditions – on a good day, on a bad day, when we feel rested, when we feel tired – then we are really achieving freedom.

Dr. David Carbonell is a leading CBT therapist and author of *Panic Attacks Workbook*. He says: "If you do your practicing only on the days you feel good, or only on days that conditions are just right, you won't leave the panic behind: you will just reach a compromise with it and it will continue to plague you."

Here is something very, very interesting: we can learn *the most* from practicing on a bad day. We learn that panic can't hurt us, even on a bad day. And we learn we can cope, even on a bad day.

So, if it's a bad day, do the outing anyway. If it's just too hard, go ahead and practice, but do an easier step. Give yourself permission to do a smaller step. The important thing is that you continue to practice!

If the next day is also a bad day, repeat the same step. When you're done, you probably just completed your two best practices of the month – practicing on bad days!

9) The most powerful practices are without any safety crutches

Letting go of safety crutches is a huge shortcut.

10) After the practice is completed:

If you experienced anxiety or panic, that is a success!

The learning process is actually helped when we experience anxiety or panic during our practices. Remember, the two most important things to learn from outings:

1. Panic cannot hurt me.
2. I can cope with any experience of anxiety or panic, without any crutches.