

My “0 to 10” scale

One of the tools for recovery that I'm practicing is to observe my anxiety on a scale of 0 to 10. It's helpful sometimes to share my number with you. This helps me practice my “observing” skill, and it communicates to you how challenging my experience is. Observing my anxiety and sharing my number with you in this way helps me cope and helps me make progress in my recovery.

When I share my number with you, your job is very easy: all you have to do is listen. You don't have to *do* anything. Whatever my number is, you don't have to worry. Anxiety and panic are uncomfortable, but not dangerous. And when I experience discomfort, that is actually part of the recovery process.

So, on the scale from “0 to 10”, “0” is when I feel completely calm and peaceful and safe. And “10” is the best panic attack I can have: the one that would win the first prize in a contest.



Here's what the numbers mean:

0: completely calm

1: very comfortable

2 or 3: low anxiety

4 to 6: moderate anxiety

7 or 8: high anxiety

9 or 10: a panic attack: extremely unpleasant, but not dangerous. A panic attack generally lasts only a few minutes.

Advantages of Using the “0 to 10” Scale

Using the “0 to 10” scale can be tremendously helpful.

Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm doing something very challenging, I'm experiencing high anxiety, and I'm with a support person. I could try to explain what I'm experiencing. But unless my support person has personally experienced something similar, it will be hard to explain. I could talk about it for 20 minutes, and my support person might still really have no idea what it feels like!

Now, let's say instead of trying to explain the experience, I just tell my support person my anxiety number, on my “0 to 10” scale. Anyone can understand that pretty easily. It takes me about five seconds to tell my number, and it actually communicates *more information* to my support person. It lets him or her know exactly how challenging it is. I'm not trying to get my support person to understand the experience, which can be very frustrating, and – believe it or not – is really not that important anyway.

Here's another big advantage of using the 0 to 10 scale when I talk about my anxiety: I might spend only a few seconds talking about my anxiety, and the rest of the time, I can focus on my recovery tools and other things I'm doing. This is a lot more helpful for recovery, and probably a lot more fun for my support person!