

In Vivo Exposure While Sheltering in Place

Just how difficult is it to do in vivo exposure while sheltering in place?

Below are the “**Sample In Vivo Items**” from our PE Training Supplement handout. These include sample in vivo exposure items for combat trauma, motor vehicle accidents, sexual trauma, and natural disaster. They were intended to give workshop participants ideas about things clients may avoid when they have experienced a particular type of trauma. Real clients will work with you to generate their own lists but the sample lists represent a broad array of the types of items clients may include.

At first glance, about a third to **half of the items on the list are accessible** without leaving the house and without any modification at all. These items are highlighted in yellow.

A second category of items involve travel outside the house but **do not involve public contact**. These items are highlighted in pink. Depending on the level of restriction clients may need to do these less frequently than in normal times, but they may still be accessible in some areas.

Many items can be confronted, at least initially, via technology. We often begin exposures using this type of media because it provokes less distress than live confrontation, and these exposures can be done at home. Once restrictions are relaxed, the client can progress to live situations that provoke more intense distress. Analog or technology resources items are highlighted in blue.

In the unhighlighted group, there are a few items that require live confrontation with other people to evoke the necessary response. For these items you can ask about the specific emotion or outcome the client is avoiding, and brainstorm about other situations to which the client may have similar reactions. We routinely ask this question in PE to vary the context of exposures in order to deepen learning, but it also may assist you in uncovering other ways to do exposure to the same avoided emotion or outcome. If you are unable to come up with analogous situations, the exposure will need to wait until restrictions are lifted, but it is worth noting that **these items are much fewer in number** than the other types of items.

Most important, remember that PTSD isn't taking a break because your client's lifestyle is altered due to physical distancing. **Anxiety related to some cues will decrease** because there are fewer opportunities to be triggered by stimuli out in the community. **Other cues will be intensified, or new ones discovered** because the context has radically changed. For example, disconnection with family members may be more intense because there is more opportunity to notice it, while lack of peace and privacy may increase irritability. These are opportunities to add to the hierarchy and target those situations specifically.

Likewise, there will be **greater opportunity to practice in vivo with family members than before**. So, while interactions with some people may be more limited, sheltering in place may open up more opportunities for others, --e.g., helping children with homework, staying at the dinner table longer than usual, watching a TV show together, playing a board game, or doing chores together.

Seek consultation for help untangling these new challenges. We are better at this when we tackle it as a community than if we tackle it alone. At CDP we are available by email, telephone or video-conference. We also hold an open consultation meeting on Thursdays. If you would like a calendar invite to this meeting, send an email to peclc-ggg@usuhs.edu.

Sample In Vivo Items

Combat

- Movie or TV shows with war/combat
- Stadium events
- Burning smells (e.g., smoke, fire, BBQs)
- Construction sites
- Middle Eastern spices /scents
- Military vehicles/Humvees
- Talking to other Service members or Veterans about combat experiences
- Loud noises (e.g., car backfiring)
- Fireworks
- Seeing wounded /injured people
- Sand/beach/desert
- Hot weather
- Gas stations
- Convenience stores (7/11)
- “Big Box” or other crowded stores
- Hearing a foreign language (e.g., Arabic)
- Seeing people in Middle Eastern clothing
- Children playing in a park
- Stray dogs
- Military gear/memorabilia/insignia
- Being at a military base
- Going to an appointment at a VA hospital
- Driving on crowded roads
- Dead animals
- Roadside trash or debris
- Firearms
- Being “unarmed”
- Traffic/being boxed in on the road
- Violent video games

Core fears related to combat trauma are often related to being put in harm’s way or a life-threatening event again; feeling unsafe or unable to protect oneself and others (e.g., military colleagues, family members); bad things happening unpredictably; remembering the combat event and losing emotional control; showing weakness, including PTSD symptoms; letting military colleagues or others down; loss of loved ones; becoming close to and trusting others; people who appear threatening or like the enemy.

Motor Vehicle Accident (MVA)

- Wearing seat belt
- Checking a seat belt obsessively
- Sitting in a certain seat of a vehicle
- Driving
- Time of day or night
- Places, certain roads
- Traffic conditions
- Passenger count
- Type of vehicle
- Weather
- Riding as a passenger
- Talking while driving or riding
- Crossing a street
- Pedestrian crossings
- Smell of gasoline
- Driving on a similar highway/road
- Smell of burning plastic or hair
- Pain/injury related to the accident
- Scars or disfigurement (self or other)
- Song that was on the radio
- Sound of car screeching
- Medical or hospital settings
- Police emergency services siren
- Medical procedures
- Checking behaviors related to driving safety (looking behind too many times, tentative about parking, merging, driving the speed limit)
- Getting lost
- Using or not using GPS
- Car insurance company/paperwork

Core fears related to MVAs are often related to being in another accident or causing an accident with careless behavior, thinking about the accident leading to a loss of emotional control, or being at fault for another accident.

Sexual Abuse/Sexual Assault

- Going out at certain times of day or night
- Going out alone
- Being at home alone
- Associated clothing, shoes, makeup
- Associated smells (alcohol, cologne, body odor)
- Sweat, sweaty smell
- Physical characteristics of the perpetrator (incl. voice, appearance, gender)
- Dirty fingernails, hands
- Cigarette smell or breath
- Doctor visits or medical treatments
- Being held in an immobile position (like at the dentist or doctor, massage)
- Putting something in the mouth (dentist)
- General or specific touch
- Associated music
- Associated foods, food textures
- Associated rooms (shower, bathroom, bedroom, door closed or locked)
- Associated places, parts of town
- Parties, bars
- Groups of people
- People who are drinking, intoxicated
- Words/phrases, esp. explicit or “dirty”
- Terms of endearment
- Going to the gym
- Saying “no,” refusing to cooperate with someone’s wishes
- Talking to someone about the trauma
- Sleeping with bedroom door unlocked
- Sleeping with bedroom door left open
- Walking alone outdoors
- Sitting with one’s back to people
- Responding to an intimate partner
- TV shows or movies with evocative scenes (intimacy or sex, sexual assault, violence)
- Small, confined spaces
- Hugging or kissing significant others/loved ones
- A perceived vulnerable position with another person (i.e., alone, someone larger, socially more powerful, louder, expressing anger)

Core fears related to sexual assault are often related to being assaulted or harmed again, being judged as promiscuous, being blamed for the assault, shame, being rejected as damaged or dirty, remembering the assault, and losing emotional control.

Natural Disaster

- Weather conditions
- Locations perceived as vulnerable to natural catastrophes
- Items associated with emergency preparedness (flashlight, candles, storm cellar)
- Feeling trapped (small room, elevator, locked door)
- Windows
- Windowless rooms
- Emergency sirens and sounds
- Fire alarms and drills
- Smells associated with the disaster or aftermath (e.g., burned plastic, flesh, decomposition, mold, gasoline)
- Smoke
- Fire
- Traffic jams
- Clothing/shoes worn at the time
- Topography/landscape associated with the disaster (e.g., mountains, ocean)
- TV shows or movies with content related to natural disasters

Core fears related to natural disasters are often related to being in another disaster or dangerous situation beyond one’s control, failing to prepare for a disaster, or thinking about the event leading to loss of emotional control.