

OCD and Anxiety: The Value of Doing Nothing

Angela Couch RN MSN PMHNP-BC

and

Jennifer Wells LISW-S

Objectives

- Provide an overview of anxiety and OCD
- Identify the reinforcing nature of neutralizing behaviors
- Explore what is involved with “doing nothing”

Anxiety

- An intense spike of physiological distress that may or may not have associated thoughts/worries
 - Racing heart
 - Shortness of breath
 - Butterflies
 - Churning or upset stomach
 - Sweating or cold chills
 - Fight or flight
 - Often cues a reaction “need to do something to fix this”

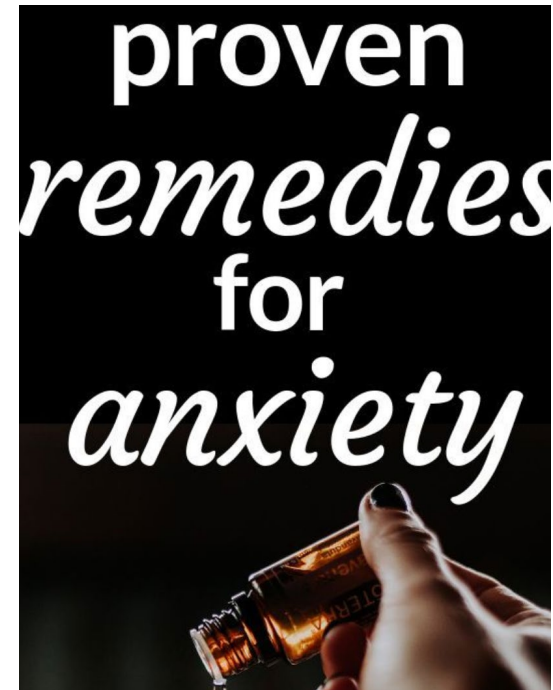
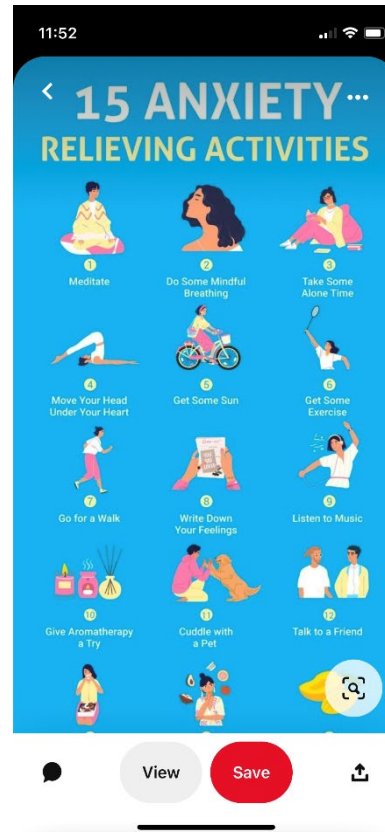
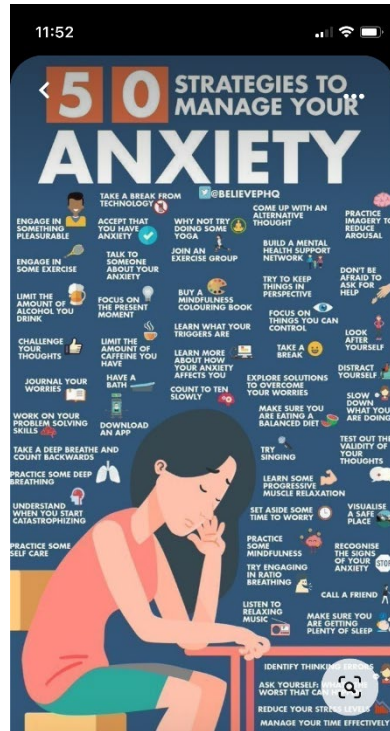
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

- Unwanted thoughts, feelings, images or urges that cause intense distress
- Attempts to neutralize or avoid the distress via compulsive physical or mental behaviors or rituals
 - Reassurance seeking (internet research, asking others)
 - Ritual prayer
 - Handwashing
 - Organizing
 - Avoiding certain situations or triggers
 - Re-doing compulsions
 - Checking
- Relief is temporary, and distress is reinforced and returns, therefore locking in the need to “do something” again

Evolution and Anxiety

- Fight or Flight...
 - Those with good instincts went on to survive and procreate, because they sensed dangers ahead and took action that could be life-saving
- Freeze...
 - Those that did not react were eaten by saber tooth tigers and perished in other Jumanji-reminiscent ways

Human Nature: “Anxiety is a problem, so do something!!”

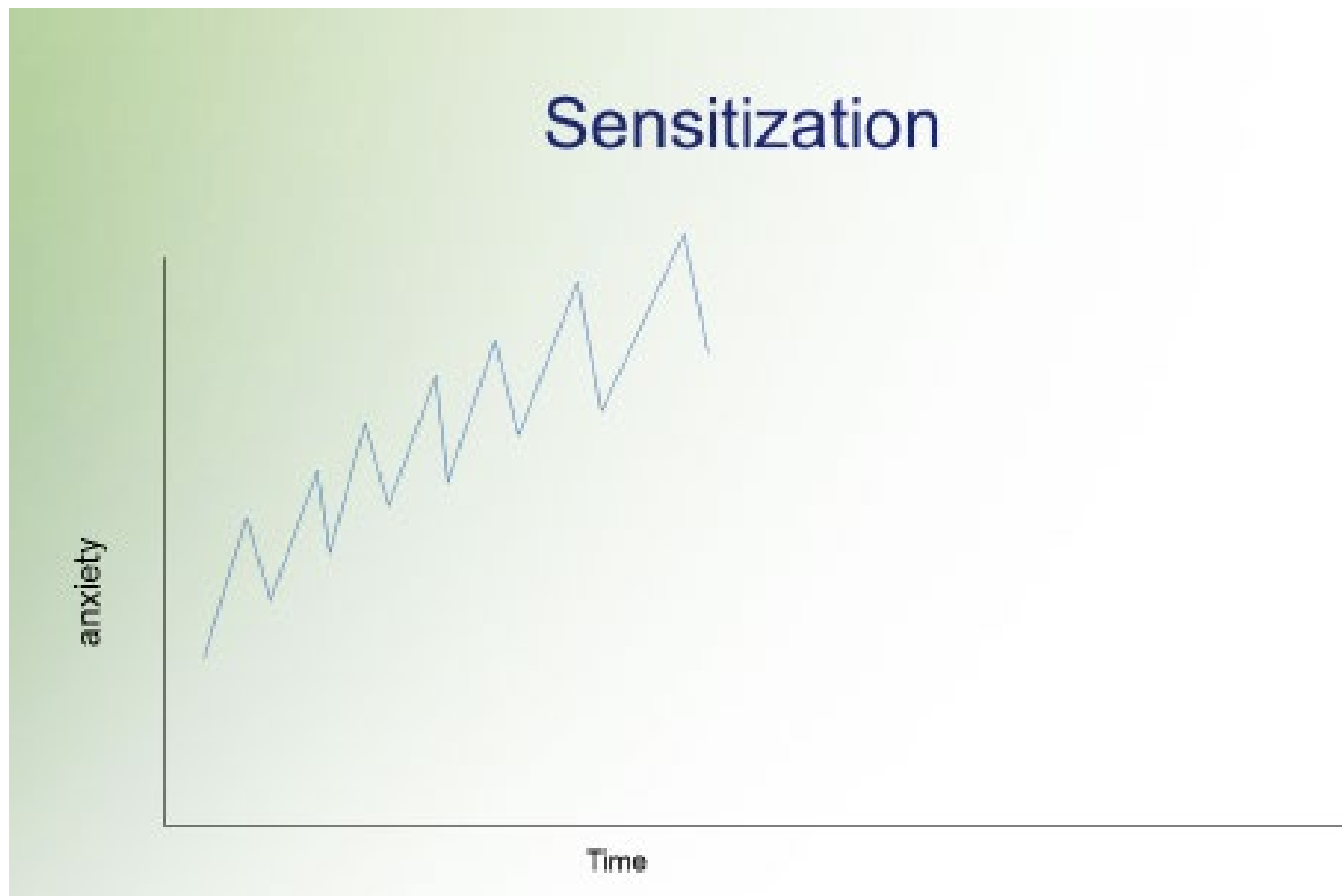


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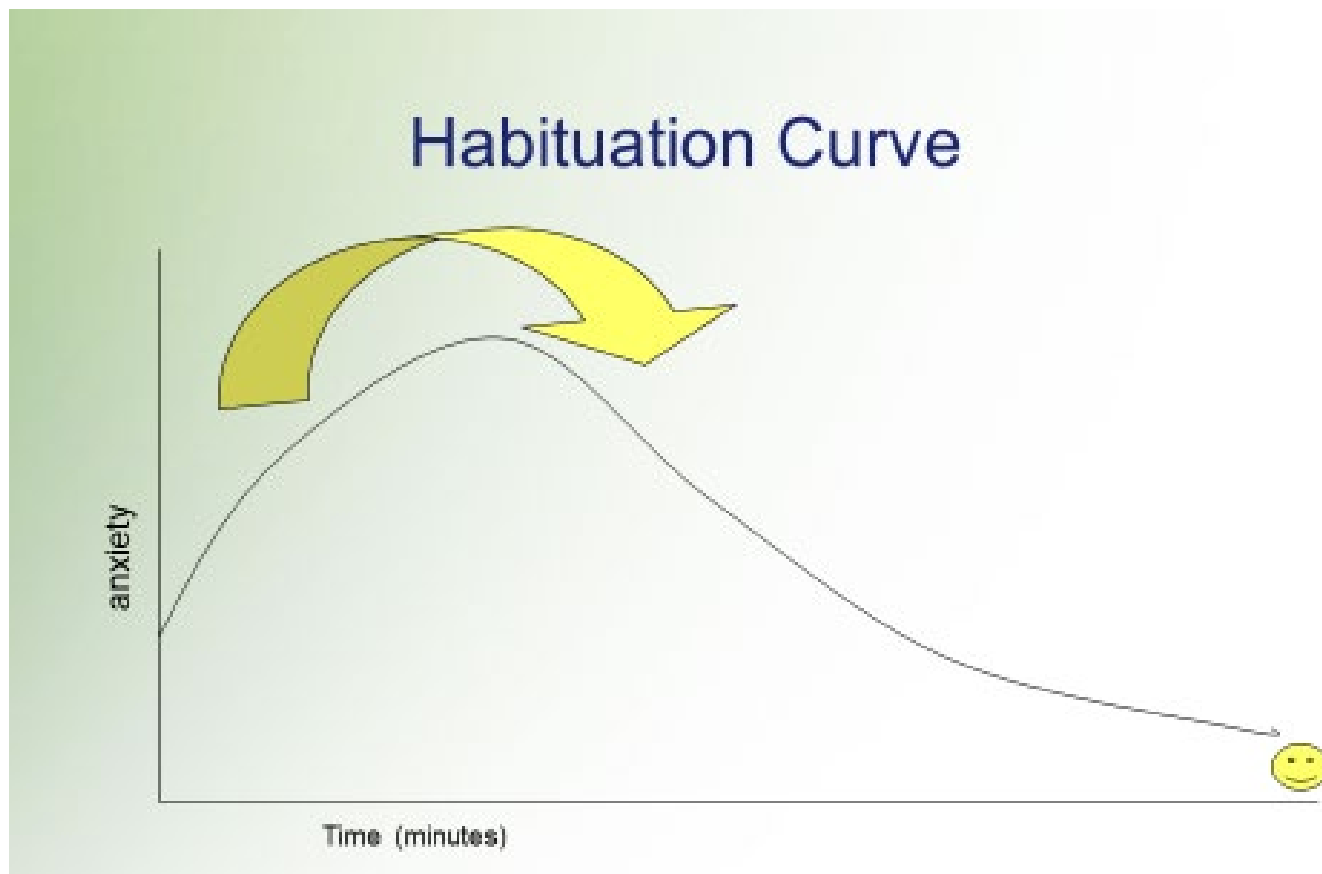
What are some of the “things” that people do?

- Resist
- Reassure themselves
- Self medicate
- Engage in compulsions
- Stall/ procrastinate
- Avoid triggering situations
- Use “crutches” or safety behaviors
- Worry (mentally engage with the content)

Anxiety: Trying To Do “Something”



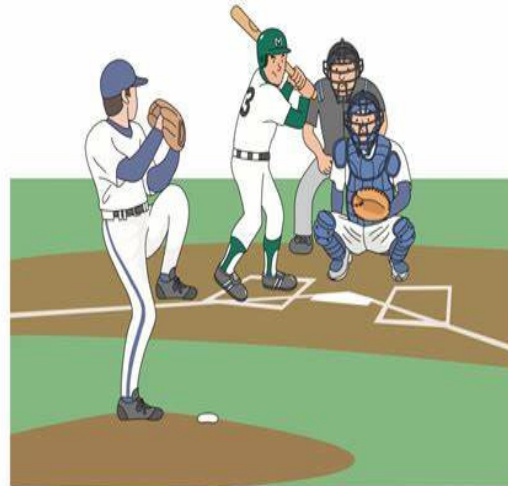
Anxiety: Doing “Nothing”



Seeing Anxiety Differently?

- Need to reframe our thinking on anxiety
 - Humans continue to experience anxiety, but “threats” are different, and no longer include saber tooth tigers
 - Reframe anxiety as not inherently “bad,” it’s just a misguided attempt to protect ourselves
- Anxiety as a helper
 - Motivates us to do things that need done
 - Helps us meet deadlines
 - Reminds us what we care about
 - Uncertainty and unknowns create excitement

The Excitement of Not Knowing



Why Not Do “Something?”

- Reinforces the idea that all anxiety is bad and intolerable
- Makes the anxiety stronger over time
- Over time, you may find you need to do more and more to manage the anxiety adequately
 - Example—OCD related rituals may get longer or more complex over time

What is “Nothing?”

- Be an observer
- Enjoy the game
- Set limits on “worry” time
- Acceptance
- Don’t engage

Non- Engagement Responses

- Give a label (“that’s just my anxiety”)
- Pretend to agree with anxious thoughts
 “whatever” “it’s possible” “if you say so”
- Lean into it
 - “bring it on”
- Engage in value-driven behaviors

Performance anxiety case example

- High schooler is trying out for the varsity baseball team and is having physiological anxiety and “what if?” anxious thoughts

Examples of doing “Something”

- Asking a friend whether they think I should bother or not
- Practicing my throwing over and over until I get it “just right”
- Staying up all night reviewing the right moves in my head, and planning how I will handle myself at tryouts
- Not eating before tryouts in case I’m nauseated, and taking the medication the doctor gave me “just in case” I have a panic episode
- Mentally practicing what I’ll do if I have to throw up
- Coming up with an excuse to avoid trying out so I’m not embarrassed

Examples of doing “Nothing”

(Non-Engagement Responses)

- “Thanks for the reminder that tryouts are important to me!”
- “Yup, it’s possible that I won’t make the team and I will embarrass myself trying.”
- “Oh good, it’s time for tryouts. I hope that my anxiety is out of control!”
- “If I throw up, the coach will know that I am really committed!”
- Focus attention on the physical aspects of the sport.

OCD case example

- An individual with OCD is highly distressed over the unwanted images they have about harming their new puppy.

Examples of doing “Something”

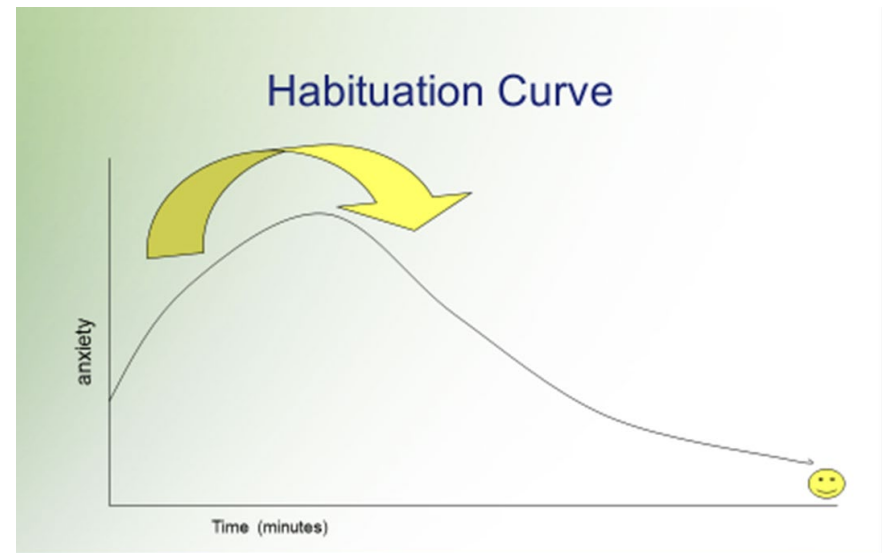
- Arranging to not be alone with the puppy
- Making sure the knives are put away
- Always taking off the collar
- Avoiding playing with the puppy
- Trying to get reassurance from my boyfriend and parents that I would never do something like that

Examples of doing “Nothing” (Non-Engagement Response)

- “Good one, OCD! I predicted that you would use my new puppy against me.”
- “It’s possible that today is the day that I will finally turn into a puppy abuser!”
- “I want to have this obsession many times today because it will remind me that I am doing a good job interacting with my puppy.”
- Play with the puppy!

Conclusion

- Pulling back to avoid anxiety makes it stronger and prolongs the anxiety (sensitization)
- Leaning in to anxiety weakens it and over time leads to habituation (desensitization)



Assignment

Leave here and do one thing outside your comfort zone today!

