Describing Habituation to Patients

**Example 1:** “Prolonged Exposure works in part, through the concept of habituation- that idea that we get used to things that may be upsetting at first, but in reality, are not actually dangerous or life-threatening.

For example, imagine that you move from the suburbs to a street-level apartment in a big city. The first night in your new home you have trouble sleeping because of all the “city noises”- traffic, sirens, people walking by on the sidewalk outside your window.

At first you think there is no way you are going to be able to sleep with so much noise going outside. You run into your neighbor in the hallway the next morning and ask him, “How do you sleep with all the traffic outside our building?” Your neighbor replies, “When I first moved here, I felt the same way. But to be honest, I barely notice it anymore. I sleep like a baby.”

Although skeptical, you’re surprised after a few weeks that you barely notice it anymore, and that you too are “sleeping like a baby.” You’ve habituated to the noise.

This is how Prolonged Exposure works. By repeatedly confronting avoided situations, people, thoughts, activities, your feared response to these things will lessen.”

**Example 2:** “Ever been swimming in the ocean in early June? The water can be cold and sometimes it’s hard to take the plunge and get your head wet. But once you do, what do you notice? You get used to the water temperature and it feels comfortable. You forget that it was cold and that you didn’t want to get in.”

**Example 3:** “I’d like you to try something when you go home. Rent a DVD of a scary movie or borrow one from a friend. Pick out some scary scenes and watch them multiple times if you can. Notice how your response changes from the first time you watch the scenes to the last time you watch them. The first time-do you feel nervous? Jumpy? Do you close your eyes when something bad is about to happen to one of the characters? What about the tenth time? Are you still as nervous? My hunch is that you won’t be. And this is because you’ve gotten used to the scenes and see that they’re kind of predictable. This is kind of how habituation works.”