

HANDOUT 7-A

THE NEUROTIC MOUSE EXPERIMENT

Chances are, you have developed a pattern of avoiding situations that make you anxious. If you feel panicky on an airplane, you probably won't fly. If you are terrified of social events, you probably avoid them if you can. On the surface, it clearly makes sense to avoid what makes you feel uncomfortable. However, we now understand that avoiding anxiety-producing situations leads to a greater level of anxiety in the end. Besides, avoidance might cause us to miss out on something that we would dearly like to do.

To show you how easy it is to develop a pattern of avoidance, I want to tell you about the famous "neurotic mouse" experiment. A two-room mouse "apartment" was constructed. One room was white and the other was black. A mouse was placed in the black room and administered a painful but harmless electric shock through the floor. The mouse would initially freeze but would eventually start running around in an apparent effort to escape the shock. Let's say that just by chance, he runs into the white room. At that point, the electricity is turned off and he is never shocked again.

If you pick the mouse up and place him back into the black room, he is likely to run to the white. Place him back in the black again and again, and he will continue to escape to the white room, even though he is never shocked again.

The mouse has developed a conditioned respond to the black room. Put him in there, and he immediately feels afraid. He can't help it, and he never stays in the black room long enough to learn that he is safe there. Also, when he goes into the white room, he experiences a reduction in anxiety, which likely feels good to him. Since it always feels good to run into the white room, he will do it every time.

Now if the black room were indeed dangerous, the mouse's behavior would be appropriate. However, we know that he is equally safe in both rooms. Unfortunately, the mouse won't know he is safe until he spends some time there.

Let's suppose that we close the door, and place some mouse food and another mouse companion in the black room. When we again place the mouse in the black room, he will initially feel quite afraid. However, since there is no way out, his fear will eventually dissipate. He might even decide that the black room is preferable.

To overcome your fear, you might also have to go into the black room. Fortunately, you don't have to do it all at once. You can do it in little steps. Your therapist will help you learn how to do this.