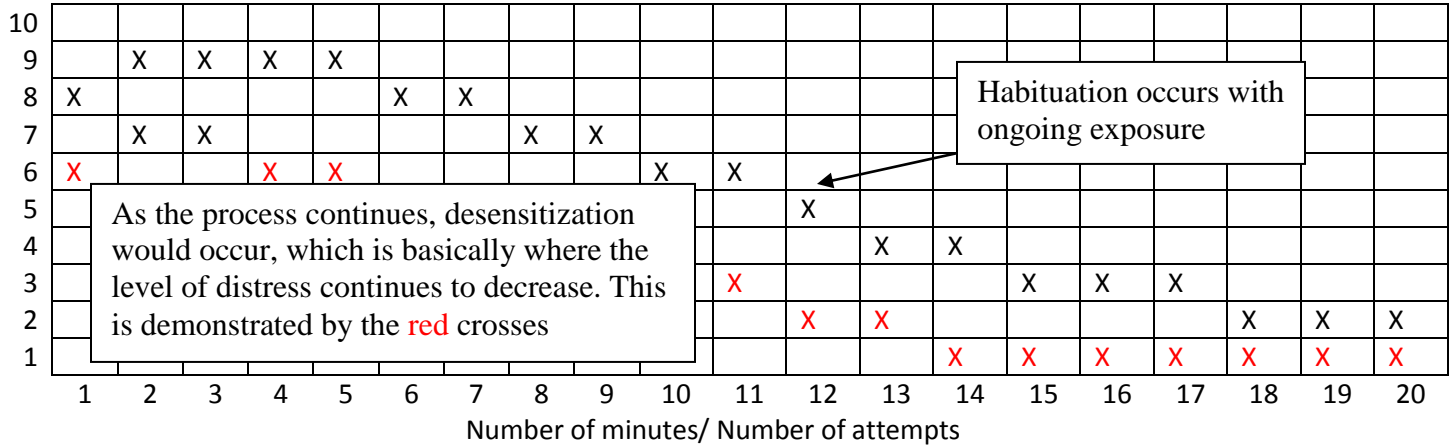


Extinction Bursts

Usually when we continually expose ourselves to situations that we find distressing, our distress levels subside as habituation takes place and ultimately desensitization occurs as the process continues. This process is demonstrated on the exposure chart:

Level of
Distress



When we undertake exposure on something that we find distressing, it is very common to experience “extinction bursts”. These are increases in distress that are experienced as part of the desensitisation or extinction process. This is often a normal part of the process, however extinction bursts can be very distressing for people who do not realize this. They can be interpreted as “evidence” that the desensitisation process is not working or the distressing stimuli is indeed dangerous. Ceasing the exposure process during an extinction burst can be dangerous because it may result in the distressing stimuli being more distressing after the process than it was beforehand. As such, it is very important to “press on” through the exposure process until the level of distress has well and truly plateaued. An extinction burst demonstrated on a desensitization chart is as follows:

Level of
Distress

