

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough **NHS**

Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust

A Cambridge University Teaching Trust

Coping with Phobias

Primary Care Psychological Treatment Service
Cambridge & Peterborough Mental Health Trust (Cambridge)

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1.1 WHAT IS A PHOBIA?

A phobia is an extreme fear of an object or situation. This fear is much more intense than the fear most other people experience in relation to the same thing. The result of such intense fear is often a strong desire to avoid the feared situation. A person who is phobic often doesn't worry about their fears when they are in a "safe" place. However, when they come face-to-face the thing that they fear, they feel very frightened and panicky. They may try to escape as quickly as they can.

There are many different kinds of phobias. Many phobias are quite complex. This booklet deals with **simple phobia**. A simple phobia is a fear of a single object or situation. People with simple phobias usually experience their symptoms if they are faced with the object or situation that they fear. They also may feel anxious if they think they may come into contact with the feared situation in the near future. The rest of the time, though, they are symptom-free. There are many different kinds of simple phobias. Some of the most common are listed below:

- Fear of spiders
- Fear of heights
- Fear of enclosed spaces (claustrophobia)
- Fear of blood
- Fear of needles
- Fear of snakes
- Fear of thunderstorms
- Fear of wasps or bees
- Fear of flying

There are many other kinds of simple phobias that are not listed. The information and strategies presented in this booklet are useful tools for overcoming any kind of specific fear of an object or situation.

Here is an example of someone with a specific phobia:

For as long as he could remember, Simon had been very afraid of spiders. He wasn't sure how or why he had developed such a fear, since he had never been bitten by a spider and could not remember any specific scary incident that had made him afraid, although he recalled that his mother had also been fearful of spiders. He noticed that his fear seemed to increase in intensity as he got older. Whenever he saw a spider, even a small one, he began to feel very panicky: his heart started to race, and he started sweating and trembling. He would often shout to his wife, and then quickly leave the room. He described feeling afraid that spiders were faster than he was and would certainly bite him if they had the chance. Simon avoided spending time in the park with his daughter because he was fearful of encountering a spider, and even started avoiding going out in the garden. He often checked corners and doorframes for cobwebs; whenever he saw a cobweb, he started to feel very anxious, and quickly asked his wife to sweep it away. He noticed that he even felt anxious when he saw a picture of a spider in a book he was reading to his daughter; when this happened, he quickly turned the page.

1.2 Where do phobias come from?

Phobias can have several different causes. In some cases, people “learn” to be afraid. For example, a child playing with a dog may pull its tail and get bitten. The child responds (not surprisingly) with fear and distress, and learns to fear and avoid dogs in the future – even though not all dogs are dangerous.

Some people with phobias cannot remember a specific incident that triggered their fear. These people may have learned to be afraid from other people. For example, a child may have had a parent (or someone else) who taught them that dogs are scary. This child may grow up to be an adult with a dog phobia. Another child might notice that his mother is afraid of dogs and believe that he should be scared of dogs too. This child may also grow up to be an adult with a dog phobia. This means that people can learn to be afraid of things, even if they never have a scary encounter of their own.

For many people with phobias, it is not entirely clear what caused their phobia. *However, it is certainly not necessary to know the exact cause of a phobia in order to get rid of it.*

1.3 Symptoms

When people come into contact with the thing that they fear, they experience a many different symptoms. These symptoms can be categorised into three subgroups:

Physical symptoms: These include physical sensations such as increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, fast breathing, muscle tension or weakness, “butterflies in the stomach”, and so on.

Behavioural symptoms: These symptoms usually involve either “fleeing” (e.g., moving speedily out of the way) or “freezing” (e.g., feeling unable to move).

Emotional and cognitive symptoms: The emotion experienced is, of course, fear. Sometimes people might also experience other emotions, such as embarrassment or anger. People will often have very specific thoughts about the object or situation that they fear – for example, Simon feared that spiders would bite him and were extremely fast, making it very difficult for him to escape.

1.4 Why won't phobic fear just go away?

The kinds of reactions described above actually prevent the symptoms from going away. These symptoms increase distress and make it last longer. They also lead to new symptoms, such as anxiety and dread when someone thinks that they may have to soon face the thing they fear.

The biggest roadblock to getting rid of phobic fear is **avoidance**. When someone is very fearful of something, they tend to avoid it. This helps in the short term – it prevents the person from becoming anxious. But there are big problems with avoidance. In the long run, avoidance keeps anxiety going. This is because it makes it very difficult to learn that the feared object or situation is not as scary as the person thinks it is. It also makes it very difficult for a phobic person to learn that if he or she faced the feared situation, his or her feelings of anxiety would decrease on their own. Avoidance also limits people – it means that they don't get to do some things that they might actually enjoy.

Here is the issue: the more afraid you are of something, the more you avoid it, and the more you avoid it, the worse the fear gets! Remember Simon's example – he avoided going to the park or spending time in his garden because he was afraid of encountering a spider. This kind of avoidance prevented him from learning that he was unlikely to see a spider in either of these places, and even if he did, he was very unlikely to be bitten. It also prevented him from learning that if he went to the park and stayed there for a little while, his anxiety level would slowly come down.

The **thoughts** that people have in response to the feared object or situation can also be problematic. Very often, these thoughts have to do with what will happen when the person faces the feared situation – for example, Simon was afraid that if he was in the presence of a spider, he would be bitten (and maybe chased). Such thoughts may not be realistic, but they certainly provoke a great deal of anxiety.

Sometimes the **reactions of other people** can also help maintain phobic anxiety. Often, others will do things so that the phobic person does not have to face the thing(s) that they fear. In other words, they help the person avoid their fear, and thus never learn that the situation is not as scary as they think. Again, consider Simon's example: he would call upon his wife to sweep away cobwebs and to rid the house of any spiders. Whenever she did so, it prevented him from learning that he did not need to be so afraid.

The rest of this booklet will teach you about strategies to help you cope with your fear. Most of these strategies deal with avoidance. Remember, the more you avoid the thing that you fear, the worse the fear gets. The best way for you to be better able to cope with your fear is to slowly and gradually start to face your fear. Exposing yourself to the thing that you fear will help you learn two very important things: 1) that the situation that makes you so afraid is not as scary as you thought, and 2) that your anxiety will come down as you spend more time facing your fear. In the beginning, facing your fear can seem very frightening – this is why you should do this one step at a time. This booklet will teach you how to do this.

STRATEGIES TO HELP COPE WITH PHOBIAS

To summarise the previous section, the more afraid of something you are, the more you avoid it, and the more you avoid it, the worse the fear gets. Although it feels like the complete opposite of what you want to do when you have a phobia, the upshot of this is that the most effective way to get over a phobia is to start facing the thing that frightens you! The more you face up to something, the more you will find your fear dying away.

This process can seem very frightening, especially at first. That is why you should face your fears in a very gradual fashion and at your own pace. It is a very good idea to start small. For example, in the case of Simon, it would be best if he started with something that caused him only mild anxiety – perhaps by looking at some pictures of spiders. After some practice doing this, Simon would most probably find that his anxiety level came down and actually felt quite manageable. At this point, he might try something that caused him just a little bit more anxiety, like watching a movie with spiders in it. After he worked on this for a while, he would likely find that his anxiety continued to go down. When he felt comfortable, he would move on to something a little bit more anxiety-provoking, and so on. Slowly but surely, Simon would get close to facing a real live spider. However, he would never start at that step!

Before you get started, you may want to consider...

Asking your partner, a family member, or a friend to help you along the way. It can be quite helpful to have some support as you begin to face your fear. Asking someone you trust to give you a hand can be a very useful strategy. If you decide to do this, give him/her a copy of this booklet and ask him/her to read it. Spend some time explaining your fear to them. When you are ready to start giving the exercises a try, get them to accompany you and provide you with support. Make sure they read about the exercise and understand what you are supposed to do. Very often, other people can be good at helping you come up with more realistic thoughts about the things that you fear and reminding you of what you need to do to conquer your anxiety.

Spend some time learning how to relax. Remember the physical symptoms of anxiety? These symptoms (e.g., heart racing, sweating) can be anxiety-provoking in themselves! It may be a good idea to practice some techniques to help you relax and reduce those physical symptoms. Slow, deep breathing can be very helpful. Relaxing your muscles is also useful. At the back of this booklet are some tips on relaxation. Remember: learning how to relax effectively takes practice. You may want to spend some time practising these skills before you move on to the next step.

2.1 WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?



The first step is to think very carefully about your fear. What is it that you are afraid of? Write it down below.

2.2 SET A GOAL



What has your phobia prevented you from doing? What would you like to be able to do? Give it some thought – then write down a goal.

For example, Simon's goal was:

"I want to be able to stay calm when I see a spider in the house - be able to put it in a cup and bring it outdoors"

What is your goal?

2.3 RATING YOUR FEAR

As you go through these exercises, you will be asked to rate your fear. You have probably noticed that your level of fear varies somewhat – in some situations you feel only mild anxiety, while in other situations you feel very scared indeed. Think about your different levels of anxiety - fear can range from nothing (e.g., you feel completely safe and calm) to the worse anxiety imaginable (e.g., you are completely terrified). When you are asked to rate your fear, give your fear a number between 0 and 100 – 0 represents no fear at all, and 100 represents the worst anxiety imaginable.

2.4 CREATING A HIERARCHY OF FEARED SITUATIONS

Level of fear tends to vary in different situations. The first step is to make a list of these situations – starting with the situations that don't cause you much fear at all, and building up to the situations that you find the most frightening (and therefore avoid the most). The purpose here is to develop a list that reflects the full range of situations that you fear and avoid. Begin with the things that provoke only mild difficulty, and work up to the things that you find scariest and avoid the most. For each of things on your list, provide a rating of fear from 0 to 100.

As an example, here is Simon's list:

	<u>Rating scale (0-100)</u>
1. talking about spiders	5
2. looking at cartoon pictures of spiders	7
3. looking at photographs of small spiders	15
4. looking at photographs of large spiders	25
5. touching a plastic spider	20-30
6. watching a plastic spider moving on a string	30-40
7. looking at a dead spider	40
8. walking through a park or garden	40-50
9. looking in a corner or under furniture for spiders	50-60
10. looking at a small spider in an aquarium (across the room)	60
11. looking at a large spider in an aquarium (across the room)	65
12. looking at a small spider in an aquarium (up close)	70
13. looking at a large spider in an aquarium (up close)	75
14. watching a spider crawl across the table	80-90
15. watching a spider crawl on the hand of someone else	95
16. having a spider crawl on my hand	100

Notice how Simon has included a wide range of feared situations.



In the space below, create your own hierarchy of feared situations. Be sure to include a full range – some situations that are only mildly anxiety provoking, some situations that are a bit more scary, and some situations that provoke a very high level of anxiety. Give each a rating between 0-100.

- **Try to think of as many different situations as you can. Use additional paper if necessary.**
- **Take your time making your list. Give it lots of thought. It may take a few days to think it over and come up with enough situations that cover your whole range of fear.**
- **You can always add more situations to your hierarchy later on!**

Fear Hierarchy

Fear Rating (0-100)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

TIP: If you have some trouble filling in gaps in your list, ask yourself questions like:

- What would make this a little less scary?
- What would make this a little more scary?
- What if someone was with me? Would this decrease my fear rating?
- What if I was alone? Would this increase my fear rating?
- What if I tried this in an unfamiliar setting?
- What if I *imagined* my feared object or situation? How would this affect my fear rating?
- What if I watched a movie that involved my feared object or situation? How anxiety provoking would that be?
- Does how close or far away I am from the feared object make a difference?
- If I watched somebody else doing what I fear, how anxiety provoking would that be?

2.5 START SLOWLY

In order to begin facing your fear, it will be useful for you to start facing some of the situations that you find difficult. Remember: when you avoid situations that scare you, you don't give yourself a chance to learn how scary (or not scary!) the situation really is. Not only that, you will not give yourself a chance to realise that your anxiety levels will subside and your confidence will increase. **It is important to start with a situation that you rated as only mildly fearful (for example, something you rated between 5 and 15 out of 100).**

Have a look at your hierarchy. Select one of the situations that you rated as only mildly anxiety-provoking. This is the situation that you will work with first.

Before you get started, there are three very important rules to follow regarding exposing yourself to feared situations:

1. **Start small! You will want to expose yourself to your feared situations in a gradual, step-by-step fashion. Begin with situations that provoke less fear, and slowly work up to situations that provoke more fear.**
 2. **Do each exposure more than once. Repeat each exposure until you feel comfortable. This will mean repeating the exposure several times. It is usually a very good idea to repeat the exposure on several different days. As you get higher up your hierarchy, you may find that you need more exposure time in order to make you feel comfortable.**
 3. **When you are facing a feared situations, stick with it as long as you can! Your anxiety level will decrease as you stay in the scary situation longer.**
- Note: this is a good time to ask for the help of a friend or family member! Having someone there to support you can make things easier. You can try facing the situation alone when you feel more confident. Also, sometimes it is easier to first watch somebody else do what scares you – then you can try it on your own.

It is a good idea to fill out a **practice record** as you begin to expose yourself to the situations on your hierarchy.

Here is Simon's first practice record:

Date: 1 January

TARGET SITUATION	Expected Anxiety	Actual Anxiety	Outcome
Talking about spiders with my wife - we will focus on the cobwebs we found in the closet	5-10	3	Anxiety dropped
30 minutes later - talked about it again	5	1	Anxiety dropped further

Simon completed the first two columns first – he planned his target situation, and then rated the level anxiety he expected to experience. Then he went ahead and did it – he had a conversation with his wife about the cobwebs in the closet. As soon as they finished the conversation (10 minutes), he rated the level of anxiety he actually experienced, and then wrote down the outcome of the event. In this situation, he noticed that his anxiety level came down as the conversation progressed. Then he repeated the exposure – he talked about it again with his wife. This time, he expected his anxiety to be a bit lower, and his actually anxiety dropped even further. Because it is a good idea to repeat the exposure, he practised talking about spiders in the closet with his wife the next day too.

For his next task, he decided to try talking about another spider situation with his wife – this time, about how it would feel if he found a spider in the bathtub. He repeated this exposure on two different days, and again found that his anxiety levels decreased.



On the next page you will find a practice record for you to complete for your first exercise. Remember to plan the target situation first and to rate the expected level of anxiety. Then go ahead and do it. When you are done, rate the level of anxiety you actually experienced, and record the outcome.

Remember that it is a very good idea to repeat your exercises – do them several times, until you consistently feel that your anxiety is manageable in the situation. This will probably require that you repeat an exercise numerous times over the course of several days – keep doing it until you feel comfortable, and then repeat it a few more times!!!

Practice Record

Date:

TARGET SITUATION	Expected Anxiety	Actual Anxiety	Outcome
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Remember:

- **Start small**
- **Stick with it as long as you can**
- **Repeat the exposure until you feel comfortable**
- **Repeat the exposure over several different days**

There are more practice records for you to complete at the back of this booklet. It is important to complete a practice record each time you try to face a new feared situation, especially at first.

Use relaxation...when you start to feel the physical symptoms of anxiety, you can use your deep breathing or relaxation skills.

2.6 GRADUALLY ATTEMPT TO FACE SITUATIONS THAT ARE MORE ANXIETY PROVOKING

Once you feel comfortable with the first situation on your list and you have repeated the exposure exercise on several different days, you are ready to move on to the next situation on your list. Remember the rules of exposure, and always complete your practice record. As you

move up your hierarchy to more scary situations, you may find that you need to stay in the situations longer for your fear to come down, and that you may need to do more exposures over more days. This is just fine – keep at it until your anxiety feels manageable. You can't do too many exposure exercises!

If you have requested the help of a friend or family member, you can always ask them to do the task first so that you can watch. Even when you are watching, you should complete the practice record.

You may have noticed that your anxiety levels are slowly starting to come down. Why is this happening?

1. You may be starting to realise that the situations you once feared are not really as scary as you thought they were.
2. You may be starting to realise that your anxiety levels start to come down not long after you face the situation you feared.

If your anxiety levels are not coming down, it is a good idea to start again at the bottom of your hierarchy – remember, start small! Don't move on to the next step until your anxiety has come down to a manageable level. Try to stay in the feared situation as long as you can. And use relaxation skills if you need too.

2.7 KEEP PROGRESSING THROUGH THE HIERARCHY

It may take a while, but slowly make your way through the feared situations on your hierarchy. If you start to find that things are getting more difficult, review the previous sections in the booklet. You may need to work on each step longer as they get more difficult.

Moving up the hierarchy may take some time. Most people find that it takes at least several weeks to move up their list.

2.8 GOAL EVALUATION

Remember the goal you set? Have you reached it yet? Don't worry if it takes a while. It took Simon quite a while to reach his goal. He followed the rules of exposure: he started small and worked up to it gradually, and stayed in each fearful situation as long as he could. He repeated the different steps multiple times.

Once Simon started to feel less anxious around spiders, he started working on his goal. Here is a list of the steps he took:

1. He didn't leave the room when he saw a spider, and watched as his wife put the spider in a cup. He repeated this three times - until his anxiety level felt manageable.
2. With his wife in the room, he placed a cup over a spider. Again, he repeated this several times until his anxiety levels came down.

3. He tried the above step alone.
4. He practised pushing the spider into the cup with a piece of paper. This step took a long time to feel comfortable with, so he practised it many times.
5. When he finally felt that his anxiety levels were manageable, he carried the cup outside, with the piece of paper covering the top, and released the spider in the garden.



If you have not yet reached your goal, you may want to plan how you will work towards achieving it. Remember the rules of exposure. Write out the steps you will have to take to reach your goal, and work on them gradually, one by one. Ask a friend or family member to help you if you need it.

Once you have reached your goal, reward yourself! You have worked hard to get there. And you have learned a lot. It is a good idea to keep this booklet on hand – you can refer to it in the future if you ever encounter problems again.

3.1 TROUBLESHOOTING

1. I can't think of enough exposure situations – or – I can't make the feared situation happen!

Sometimes it is difficult to find ways to arrange exposure situations. For example, you don't always find a spider in your kitchen when you want to! This may require you to get a bit creative. For example, if you have a spider phobia, you may have to ask someone you trust (and someone who is not afraid of spiders!) to catch a spider or two for you to use in exposure exercises. If you have a snake phobia, you may have to go to a zoo or exotic pet store to find a live snake for you to look at. Some phobias are even more difficult. If you have a thunderstorm phobia, you will have to wait for a storm. But you can do some things that may help – for example, there are cassette tapes, CDs, and sound machines available that play the sounds of a thunderstorm. The sounds of a storm may be frightening and thus serve as a valuable exposure. Or they may help you more vividly imagine a storm. Remember – sometimes imagining what you are afraid of can be exposure in itself, and can help you prepare to face the real thing. Another idea is watching movies or videos that involve your feared situation – for example, there are lots of movies that revolve around spiders, snakes, and storms! If you have trouble thinking of ways to gradually expose yourself, ask friends and family members for ideas.

2. I can't seem to stay in the feared situation long enough to get my anxiety level down.

A few suggestions here:

1. You might want to try deep breathing or relaxation to help control your physical symptoms.
2. One thing that might be getting in your way are your thoughts. What is it that is going through your head? Very often, people with phobias think the worst when they are in an anxiety-provoking situation – but they tend to over-estimate the level of danger and imagine the worst possible catastrophe, even if that catastrophe is very unlikely to happen. If you have unrealistic thoughts like these, they are very likely contributing to your anxiety. Before you try an exposure exercise, list your thoughts – and then challenge them! (There is a chart at the back of the booklet that you can use to record your thoughts and your re-evaluations of them.) Write down some realistic thoughts on a cue card, and bring them with you into the exposure situation. When you start feeling anxious, read over the realistic thoughts.
3. Go back to the previous item on your hierarchy. Practice it some more. If you still don't feel ready to go on to the next step, maybe it is too much of a jump. Try to think of something that is not quite as anxiety provoking (e.g., more anxiety provoking than the last thing you did, but not as anxiety provoking as the situation you are having trouble with) and try it first. Follow the procedure outlined in the booklet, and when you are ready, try the exposure you were having trouble with again.

3.2 RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

A. DEEP BREATHING

Pause from whatever you are doing and slowly take a deep breath. Breathe out slowly and mentally say to yourself “RELAX”. Repeat this several times. Deep, slow breathing prevents your breathing from getting out of control, and helps bring on feelings of relaxation. It is a good idea to practice deep breathing at times when you are not anxious; once you are comfortable using this technique when you are relaxed, you can try using it when you feel more anxious.

B. RELAXATION

Relaxation techniques can help you become generally more calm and to lower your overall level of anxiety. With practice, you will become more sensitive to how tense or relaxed your muscles are; this will enable you to recognise tension earlier, which will mean that you can then do something about it. Relaxation is a technique that takes practice. It is a good idea to practice relaxation at least twice a day, for about 30 minutes at a time (the procedure need not take longer than 10-20 minutes, but allow yourself 30 so that you know that there is no need to worry).

Relaxation is something to do be done alone and when you are expecting no interruptions. Sit or lie down in a comfortable place (a bed or a sofa are good examples). It will be helpful if the room is relaxing – warm and pleasantly lit. If you find a piece of favourite music soothing, use it as a soft background to your relaxation. If too much silence puts you on edge, leave the radio on at a low volume – preferably to a music station.

Remove your shoes and loosen tight clothing. Start by taking a couple of deep breaths. Allow yourself to be still for a few minutes to help you get in the right frame of mind and allow yourself to start to unwind. Focus on your breathing, and let your muscles slowly start to relax.

Focus your attention on your hands and arms. Tighten the muscles in this area, and notice what it feels like when these muscles are tight and tense. Hold this for about 10 seconds. Then relax the muscles in your hands and arms – let the muscles become floppy and limp. Concentrate on the changes in sensation in your muscles from the tense state to the relaxed state. Focus on the feelings of relaxation in your hand and arm.

Then move on to other muscles groups. Tighten and release each of these groups of muscles, one at a time:

- Feet, calves, thighs
- Buttocks, stomach, back
- Shoulder, neck
- Jaw, eyes, scalp

Once you have gone through each of the muscle groups, tensing and relaxing, turn your attention back to your breathing. Focus on filling your lungs, and letting the air out through your mouth as slowly as you can. Continue to breathe slowly and regularly and notice the rhythm – like wavelets, running onto and receding from a beach. While you are lying quietly, focus again on your body. Go through the muscle groups and check to see if your muscles have remained relaxed. It is not unusual for some muscles to have tensed up while you have been relaxing others. If you notice any tension at all, focus on relaxing that area. Let the muscles go loose and limp.

When you are satisfied that you are physically relaxed and that your breathing is deep and regular, let your feelings of relaxation continue to deepen. There is no hurry – just enjoy the comfort.

Sometimes people can use this time to imagine a fantasy scene in their mind – one in which they are completely calm, content, and relaxed. If you like, build a relaxing fantasy in your mind. Pay great attention to detail, using all of your senses in turn –

What can you see?
What can you hear?
What can you smell?
What can you feel?
What can you taste?

When you are ready to stop practising, count backwards from 5 to 0, and then open your eyes. Take a deep breath, stretch, and get up very slowly. Take your time and notice how relaxed you feel.

You may find that relaxation is difficult at first. You may not find it easy to relax your muscles, or you may have trouble concentrating on relaxing. This is why it is important to practice relaxation techniques – it takes time and practice to be able to relax effectively. If you practice twice a day, you will start to notice that it becomes easier to relax, and that you can become more relaxed more quickly. When you feel ready, you can reduce the amount of time you spend practising and use your skills whenever you feel you need them. With practice, you will become better at noticing when your muscles are tense, and will be able to relax them on-the-spot, without having to tense them first. This is a useful technique to use when you feel yourself getting nervous.

PRACTICE RECORD

Date:

TARGET SITUATION	Expected Anxiety	Actual Anxiety	Outcome
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PRACTICE RECORD

Date:

TARGET SITUATION	Expected Anxiety	Actual Anxiety	Outcome
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RE-EVALUATION OF THINKING

Anxiety –provoking thought	Re-evaluation of thought

MANUAL EVALUATION

We would be very grateful to hear about what you think of this manual. It is an evolving document and we will attempt to incorporate people's suggestions.

Are there any parts of the manual that are unclear or difficult to understand?

Are there any parts that were very useful for you?

Do you have any suggestions that would make the manual more effective?

Any other comments:

Please detach this page and send it to:

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