

FACING YOUR FEARS: EXPOSURE

An important step in managing anxiety involves facing feared situations, places or objects. It is normal to want to avoid the things you fear. However, avoidance prevents you from learning that the things you fear are not as dangerous as you think.

The process of facing fears is called **EXPOSURE**. Exposure involves gradually and repeatedly going into feared situations until you feel less anxious. Exposure is not dangerous and will not make the fear worse. And after a while, your anxiety will naturally lessen.

Starting with situations that are less scary, you work your way up to facing things that cause you a great deal of anxiety. Over time, you build up confidence in those situations and may even come to enjoy them. This process often happens naturally. A person who is afraid of the water takes swimming lessons every week and practises putting their feet and legs in the water, then the whole body and, finally, diving underwater. People with a fear of water can learn to love swimming. The same process occurs when people learn to ride a bike, skate, or drive a car.

Doubts about the helpfulness of exposure?

You may have tried exposure in the past and found that it did not work. However, you may have tried to face something too scary too soon, which can be overwhelming. Or, you didn't have the chance to practise repeatedly in order to get the benefits of exposure. If done correctly, exposure can be VERY effective in overcoming fears. Be willing to try again! Follow the steps below to get the most out of exposure.

Exposure is one of the most effective ways of overcoming fears. However, it takes some planning and patience.

How To Do It

STEP 1. Make a list

Make a list of situations, places or objects that you fear. For example, if you are afraid of dogs, the list may include: looking at pictures of dogs; standing across the park from a dog on a leash; standing in the same room as a dog on a leash; standing a few feet from a dog; or petting a puppy. If you are afraid of social situations, the list may include: saying “hi” to a co-worker; asking a stranger a question; making small talk with a cashier; or calling a friend on the phone.



HELPFUL HINT: Group Fears Together. Some people have a lot of different fears, so it can help to group similar fears or specific fear themes together. For example, you may have a fear of bugs, as well as a fear of heights. Make different lists for different fear themes.

STEP 2. Build a Fear Ladder

Once you have made a list, arrange things from the least scary to the most scary. You can do this by rating how much fear you have for each situation on the list, from “0” (No fear) to “10” (Extreme fear). Once you have rated each situation, use the [Fear Ladder](#) form to make a final list.



HELPFUL HINTS: When making a fear ladder, identify a specific **goal** (such as having a meal in a restaurant), and then list the steps needed to achieve that goal (e.g., go to a restaurant and get a coffee to go; have a coffee at the restaurant and sit near the door; have a snack at the restaurant and sit near the door; have a snack at the restaurant and sit at a table in the middle of the room; have a meal at the restaurant and sit near the door; have a meal at the restaurant and sit in the middle of the room). See [Examples of Fear Ladders](#) for some ideas on building your fear ladder.

- If you have a lot of different fears, build separate ladders for each fear theme.
- Each ladder should include a whole range of situations. The ladder should include some steps you can do now with mild anxiety, some that you can do now with moderate anxiety and, finally, the steps you find too difficult to do now. It is important to start really small and take gradual steps.
- Some steps on the ladder can be broken down into smaller steps. For example, if you are afraid to talk to co-workers, facing this situation could be broken up into a number of steps such as saying “hi” to a co-worker, asking a quick question, and then talking about your weekend.

- Because it is sometimes difficult to come up with steps on the fear ladder that cause only moderate anxiety (that is, somewhere between a little and very scary), you can consider other factors that might make it easier or harder for you to do.

Some examples include:

- **Length of time:** for example, talking to someone for 30 seconds is probably less scary than talking for five minutes.
- **Time of day:** for example, driving over a bridge in the middle of the afternoon versus evening rush hour.
- **Environment:** for example, swimming at a local pool versus swimming in a lake.
- **Who is with you:** for example, going to the mall with your spouse versus alone.

See [Examples of Fear Ladders](#) for some ideas about building your fear ladder.

STEP 3. Facing fears (exposure)

- Starting with the situation that causes the least anxiety, **repeatedly** engage in that activity (e.g., saying “hi” to the bus driver everyday) until you start to feel less anxious doing it. If the situation is one that you can remain in for a **prolonged** period of time (such as standing on a balcony), stay in the situation long enough for your anxiety to lessen (e.g., standing on the balcony for 20-30 minutes). If the situation is short in duration, try “looping” it, which involves doing the same thing over and over again for a set number of times (e.g., repeatedly driving back and forth over a bridge until you start to feel less anxious or making consecutive phone calls until you feel more comfortable doing it).
- If you stay in a situation long enough (or continue engaging in a specific activity), your anxiety will start to reduce. This is because anxiety takes a lot of energy and at some point it “runs out of gas”. The longer you face something, the more you get used to it and the less anxious you will feel when you face it again.



HELPFUL HINT: It can help to track your fear level during exposure exercises and to try and remain in those situations (or continue engaging in a specific activity) until your fear level drops by about 50%. For example, if you rated holding a needle as a 6/10 on the fear scale (remember that “0” = no fear and “10” = extreme fear) then you want to continue holding the needle until your fear level drops to a 3/10.

- It is important to **plan** exposure exercises in advance; that way you feel more in control of the situation. Identify what you are going to do and when you plan to do it.
- Make sure to track your progress. See the [Facing Fears](#) form, which will help you identify how anxious you were before and after facing the feared situation, and what you learned. Make copies and fill one out each time you face a fear.
- Once you are able to enter a specific situation on several separate occasions without experiencing much anxiety you can move on to the next thing on the list.

Remember - Exposures should be planned, prolonged, and repeated!



KEY: Don't Rush! It can be very scary facing the things you fear. Be patient and take your time. Go at a pace that you can manage!

Step 5. Practise

- It is important to practise on a regular basis. Some steps can be practised daily (e.g., driving over a bridge, taking an elevator, saying “hi” to a stranger, touching doorknobs), while other steps can only be done once in a while (e.g., giving a formal presentation to a large group or taking a plane trip). However, the more often you practise the faster the fear will fade.
- Don't forget to maintain the gains that you have made. Even if you have become comfortable doing something, it's important to keep exposing yourself to it from time to time, so your fears don't creep back. For example, if you have overcome a fear of needles, you should schedule routine blood tests or donate blood every six months so that your fear of needles does not return.
- Re-rate your entire fear ladder every once in a while; that way, you can see the progress you have made, and identify the steps on the ladder you still need to tackle.

Remember, you will experience anxiety when facing fears - this is normal.

Step 6. Reward brave behaviour

- It's not easy facing fears. Reward yourself when you do it!
- It may be helpful to use specific rewards as a motivation to achieve a goal. For example, plan to purchase a special gift for yourself (DVD, CD, book, treat) or engage in a fun activity (rent a movie, go to the movies, go out for lunch or dinner, plan a relaxing evening) after you reach a goal.
- Don't forget the power of positive self-talk (e.g., "I did it!").



TIP: Don't be discouraged if your fears start creeping back. This can happen from time to time, especially during stressful periods or transitions (for example, starting a new job or moving). This is normal. It just means that you need to start practising using the tools – plan some exposures! Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process.

For more information on how to maintain your progress and how to cope with relapses in symptoms, see [How to Prevent a Relapse](#) .