

Graded exposure

This activity will help you make your own graded hierarchy and start to expose yourself to situations that you've been avoiding, or perhaps using safety behaviours to cope with. As you get more comfortable with these situations, your phobia will have less of an impact on your day-to-day life.

You can fill out your own graded exposure table below.

1. Make a list of situations or activities related to your phobia that cause you distress and make you want to either avoid the situation or use a safety behaviour.
2. Give each situation a 'difficulty score' out of 10. If a situation causes you no distress, rate it 0. If it causes extreme distress, rate it 10.
3. Try to put the situations in order, from least distress to most distress.
4. Start with the lowest-ranked item on your list to expose yourself to. This should be the one that causes you the least anxiety.
5. Keep repeating the lowest-ranked item on your list until the distress you experience has reduced to a manageable level, and you can repeat the step without feeling significant fear or the urge to keep avoiding this step. This may mean having to stay in the situation for 30-40 minutes at a time, and repeat the step a number of times, before the anxiety reduces.
6. Move onto the next situation and repeat the process, practicing staying in the situation until your anxiety reduces and then repeating the situation until you stop feeling significant fear or the

urge to avoid or leave.

7. Gradually work your way through the list, remembering to not move to the next step until the level of distress at the previous step has reduced to a manageable level. This may mean practicing each step several times, and staying in each situation long enough for your anxiety to reduce.

Here's an example, based on someone having a phobia of dogs:

Task	Difficulty score (0 = no distress, 10 = extreme distress)
Looking at a picture of a friendly dog	2
Looking at a picture of a snarling dog	4
Looking at a video clip of a large dog	5
Visiting a friend with a dog behind a fence in the garden	7
Touching a friend's dog while it's on a lead	8
Staying in a room with a friend's dog while it's off its lead	9
Being left alone with a dog while it's off its lead	10
Visiting a park where there are dogs	10

To get the best out of your exposure exercise, it has to meet these 5 conditions:

1. Graded

Graded means that you don't jump into the scariest situation right away. Start with the activity that causes you the least anxiety and work your way up to the most distressing.

2. Prolonged

Prolonged means that the activity has to go on long enough for you to start feeling less distress. You need to stay in the situation until your anxiety has dropped by at least 50% from its level at the start of the exercise. This can take up to 40 minutes.

If you start doing something and stop too quickly, it's unlikely your anxiety will reduce enough for you to fully benefit from the activity. If you do stop too quickly, try to go back to the task as soon as you can and try to do it for longer.

3. Repeated

It's important to face the situation that causes you anxiety over and over, until it stops making you feel distress or compelled to perform safety behaviours. Ideally, performing the task should start to become boring. It's best to do the activity that causes you the least anxiety repeatedly, every day if possible, until this has happened. Then you can move onto the next activity on your list.

4. Without distractions

When you're performing the activities that make you anxious, it's important to make sure you're paying attention to the distress you're feeling. This is an important part of overcoming phobias. In order to do this, avoid doing anything during the exposure activities that could distract you from how you're

feeling – for example, listening to music, talking to someone, or thinking about something else. Focus on the activity and try to ‘push through’ the discomfort.

5. With reduced safety behaviours

While you’re performing the activities that make you uncomfortable, you should try to reduce the use of safety behaviours until you reach a point where they're no longer needed. Exposing yourself to activities and situations you’d normally avoid is helpful, but using safety behaviours or other coping methods prevents you from learning how to cope with the discomfort.

You should also avoid seeking excessive reassurance – for example, if you’re about to get an injection, you shouldn’t ask the clinician multiple times about the safety of the procedure, or whether or not it will hurt.

You can complete a checklist and graded exposure table below.

Task	
How is it graded?	
How long can you stay in the situation?	
How often can you repeat the situation?	
How will you avoid distractions while performing the task?	
How will you avoid safety behaviours while performing the task?	

Step	Difficulty score (0 = no distress, 10 = extreme distress)