

## Facing Your Fears

The first step to managing anxiety, worry, stress, and panic is to understand the patterns of anxiety in your life and work to change them. A typical response to anxiety is to avoid the very thing we are worried about. This may seem to help in the short term because you avoid discomfort or distress. However, in the long term it makes the anxiety much more powerful because our brains now have been trained that the way to reduce anxiety is by avoiding or escaping. The good news is that we can work together to interrupt this cycle.

One of the most powerful tools to reduce your anxiety is called **exposure**. Exposure is the process of gradually and systematically doing things that you usually avoid, such as slowly and deliberately working through stressful tasks or approaching difficult situations. This will help your brain learn that you can handle what you fear, even if it is uncomfortable or makes you nervous. The more you deliberately expose yourself to situations you fear or feel anxious about, the more you strengthen your ability to be in these situations. The trick is to start with situations that cause mild levels of anxiety and increase the intensity as you learn to cope with those feelings and thoughts. This is how we're going to see improvement.

Let's start by reading through an example of exposure, and then creating your own personalized exposure activity.

### Creating a List of Fears ("Fear Hierarchy")

*Let's see how creating a list of feared situations/activities might be helpful for someone who is experiencing anxiety. By identifying a feared situation and putting it in the context of her values and goals, Lidia will learn how to work on small steps to overcome her anxiety:*

Lidia is very concerned about what others think of her. She is especially fearful that she will do something to embarrass herself at work. She worries she will drop her lunch or plate in the cafeteria at the hospital where she works during a crowded lunchtime, and that everyone will turn to look at her and think she is stupid.

First, Lidia identifies a goal related to this anxiety that is important to her, but one that she has been avoiding. She says that she has stopped going to the cafeteria at lunchtime for fear of this embarrassment. However, it means that she does not get to really take a "break" because she eats at her desk and ends up working. It also means that she misses seeing some of her colleagues and friends. She feels like her anxiety is holding her back from these enjoyable connections and relationships.

**Lidia's goal:** Going to eat lunch in the cafeteria at noon (the busiest, most crowded time).

Next, let's look at a list of situations or activities that cause Lidia stress or anxiety from 0 (would cause no anxiety) to 10 (highest anxiety possible). These are situations or activities that lead directly to the goal Lidia has identified. Notice these situations or activities are quite specific.

**Example Fear Hierarchy**

Situation or Activity	Anxiety Rating 0 = no anxiety 10 = highest anxiety
Going to eat lunch in the cafeteria at noon	10
Purposely going into the cafeteria and dropping a tray at noon	10
Purposely going into the cafeteria and dropping a tray when it isn't busy	9
Going to eat lunch in the cafeteria at 3:30pm (when it isn't busy)	8
Going to sit with friends in the cafeteria but not eat/not bring food	7
Imagining dropping dishes in the cafeteria and having everyone stare	6
Talking about dropping dishes in the cafeteria and having everyone stare	5
Walking into the cafeteria at noon	4
Walking to the where the cafeteria is located at noon, but not entering	2

**Example Exposure Activity**

Now, let's imagine Lidia has already completed a week or two of exposure activities and has slowly progressed to more anxiety-provoking activities. She is instructed to complete the specific activity of walking into the cafeteria at noon every day and rate her anxiety before starting, during, and upon completing the activity. The table below shows an example of what one week of exposure activity would look like.

Day	Activity	Anxiety Before Starting	Highest Anxiety During	Anxiety upon Completion
Mon	Walking into the cafeteria at noon	4	6	4
Tues	Walking into the cafeteria at noon	4	5	3
Wed	Walking into the cafeteria at noon	3	4	2
Thurs	Walking into the cafeteria at noon	3	3	2
Fri	Walking into the cafeteria at noon	2	2	1
Sat	<i>Not at work</i>	---	---	---
Sun	<i>Not at work</i>	---	---	---

**Anxiety Rating:** 0 = no anxiety to 10 = highest possible anxiety

Notice how Lidia is moderately anxious the first few times she does this activity. Her anxiety rating even gets higher (worse) during the activity, which is what we expect—after all, you're doing something that you have been avoiding. However, over time, with repeated attempts, her anxiety gets less intense and eventually loses its power. That is the key—repeated attempts to face what you have been avoiding will teach your brain and body that you are okay, and that you can handle the stress of the activity or situation.

### My Fear Hierarchy

First, what is a situation or activity that is important to you, but that you have been avoiding because of anxiety? Be as specific as possible:

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Next, create a list of situations or activities that would cause you some stress or anxiety from 0 (would cause no anxiety) to 10 (highest anxiety possible). List items that build the goal you have written above. Remember to be as specific as possible when listing these situations or activities.

Situation or Activity	Anxiety Rating 0 = no anxiety; 10 = highest anxiety

### Designing Your Exposure Activity

Now, you're ready to start courageously facing your fear. Let's schedule your exposure activities for the next week.

Day	Activity	Anxiety Before Starting	Highest Anxiety During Activity	Anxiety upon Completion

Mon				
Tues				
Wed				
Thurs				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

As you complete your activity each day, remember to rate your anxiety on a 0-10 scale:

**0 = no anxiety**  
**10 = highest possible anxiety**

Expect that you'll have moderate anxiety (for example, about a 4-6) during your activity. Remember, that is the point of this exercise and means that it is working!

### Maximizing Success

Before you set off for your week, let's make sure you feel supported to start facing your fears. What are a few barriers or obstacles to completing these activities before our next session? What are some ways to overcome these?

Potential Barriers	Potential Solutions
1.	
2.	
3.	

### Tips for a Successful Exposure Experience

- Remember, the point of exposure is to feel anxious and to learn to let the anxiety naturally decrease. Reward your bravery for taking this journey to reengage with your life!
- Some people will be overwhelmed during the exposure activity and have a desire to stop it. It is really important to try to continue through the experience for the time you planned for. Remind yourself that you are supposed to feel anxious during the activity, and your anxiety will decrease over time and with practice. For exposure to work, you need to stay in the situation long enough

for your anxiety to come down. Take note of your anxiety before, during, and after the exercises, and we will discuss this in your next session.

- For some people, this exercise or activity will not increase anxiety as much as expected. In this case, continue to engage in the assigned exposure activities and really try to notice your anxiety. Take note of your anxiety ratings. We will discuss this in your next session and design your next exposure schedule based on this.

## **Reflection Activity**

As often as you can during the week, make some brief notes about what you've noticed during your exposure activities. For example, are they harder or easier than you expected? Is there anything you're learning about yourself or would like to discuss in session about this activity?

Continue to use this form for follow-up sessions. Each time, we'll review your activities for the week and your anxiety ratings. We'll revisit your fear hierarchy to make sure we haven't skipped anything, and then you'll choose your next exposure activity to practice between sessions.

