

# Overcoming My Fears: Exposure

## What is exposure?

### *Why not just stay away from things you're afraid of?*

It's normal to want to avoid things you fear. And it works - in the short run. The problem is that you don't get the opportunity to learn that the things you fear are not always as dangerous as you think.

### *So how can I overcome my fears?*

You need to gradually face the things you fear! The process of facing fears is called exposure. Exposure involves slowly and repeatedly facing things you fear until you feel less anxious.

Starting with less scary things, you work up towards facing scarier things. This process happens naturally all the time. For example, when you learned to ride a bike you started on a tricycle. Then you rode a bike with training wheels and your mom or dad holding onto the back of the bike. Finally, you worked your way up to riding a two-wheel bike on your own. This process also happens when we learn to swim or drive a car.

## Exposure: How to Do It

### *Step 1: Make a List*



The first step is to **make a list** of the situations, places, or things that you fear.

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Here's an example.

Lin has social anxiety and is afraid of a number of social situations. For example, she is scared to talk to other teens at school. She is afraid to answer questions in class and avoids doing class presentations at all costs. Lin tends to avoid going to parties unless she knows everyone who will be there. She also avoids going shopping, as she doesn't want to talk to the salespeople.

Lin's list of feared situations might include:

- talking to classmates
- asking her teacher a question
- answering a question in class
- doing a presentation
- going to a party or school dance
- going shopping and asking a salesperson to help her find a size

**EXERCISE: Pull out a piece of paper and start listing the things that you fear**

## Helpful tips for making a list:

### **Include lots of situations**

Your list should include lots of situations, some that would be easier to face and some that would be harder.

### **Group similar fears together**

Sometimes if we have lots of different fears, it can help to group similar fears together. For example, you may have a fear of heights and a fear of germs. Make a different list for each fear theme.

### **Common Fears**

Common fears include: being around other teens, trying new things, talking to unfamiliar people, public speaking, animals, insects, needles, heights, touching things that may be covered in germs, doing things alone, making mistakes, things being out of place, driving, and being in crowded places.

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## Step 2: Break Things Up Into Smaller Steps

Often, the things on your list of fears can be broken up into smaller steps. Some steps will be easier and some will be harder.

For example, Lin is afraid to talk to classmates. This can be broken up into a number of steps:



- 1) Saying "hi" to a classmate in the hall.
- 2) Asking a classmate a quick question. (For example, "Is the math quiz on Friday?")
- 3) Sharing weekend plans with a classmate.

Lin is also afraid to do a presentation in class. This can be broken up into a number of steps:

- 1) Doing a short presentation in front of a friend.
- 2) Doing a short presentation in front of the teacher.
- 3) Doing a short presentation in front of the teacher and a few friends.

**EXERCISE: Start breaking up fears on your list into smaller steps**

### ➔ Helpful tips for breaking things into smaller steps:

There are a number of ways to make something easier or harder for you to do.

#### **Length of time**

Talking to a classmate for 30 seconds is easier than talking to someone for 5 minutes. Doing a 2-minute speech is easier than doing a 5-minute speech.

#### **Distance**

Standing 20 feet from a dog is easier than standing next to one. Looking at a picture of a needle is easier than holding an actual needle.

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## Who is with you

Going to the mall with a friend may be easier than going alone. Letting yourself make a mistake when talking to your mom may be easier than making a mistake when talking to the sales assistant at a store, which may be easier than making a mistake when talking to your teacher.

## Pick a specific goal

For example, if your goal is to get a needle, list all the steps you need to take in order to accomplish the goal. Steps might include: 1) looking at pictures of needles, 2) watching videos of needles, 3) holding a needle, 4) holding the needle against your skin, 5) watching someone else get a needle, and 6) getting a needle.

## Step 3: Rate Your Fears

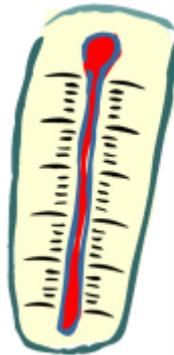
Now that you have a long list of different situations it's time to make a fear ladder. A fear ladder is a list of the situations you fear, listed from the least scary to the scariest.

In order to do this, you need to rate each situation on the fear thermometer. A fear thermometer helps you identify how much fear you have of a specific situation or thing. Use the fear thermometer to rate situations from 0 - "no fear" to 10 - "tons of fear".

Choose a number between 0 and 10, which best matches how you feel about that item, put that number next to it on your list.

### FEAR THERMOMETER

- 0 - piece of cake
- 1 - barely fazes you
- 2 - mildly scary
- 3 - starting to get concerned
- 4 - scary but doable
- 5 - not easy and feeling uncomfortable
- 6 - really gets my heart rate going
- 7 - definitely scary
- 8 - a big challenge
- 9 - super, super, scary
- 10 - freaking out



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## Step 4: Build a Fear Ladder

Now that you have a long list of situations, places, or things that scare you it's time to rank them from the least scary to the scariest. You can create different fear ladders with lots of different steps for each of your goals (like talking to a classmate or doing a presentation) or different fear themes (heights, spiders, etc.).

Here's an example of one of Lin's fear ladders.

### Fear Ladder

Goal: Make a new friend

Situation	Fear Rating
Tell a classmate about your weekend	8
Ask a classmate a quick question (for example, "Is the math quiz on Friday?")	8
Make a comment to a classmate (for example, "Have a good weekend.")	5
Say "hi" to classmate in the hall	3

Check out examples of fear ladders on the website!

**EXERCISE:** Using a blank copy of the fear ladder. Start organizing your fear items from the least scary to the scariest based on the rating you gave each item.

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**Tip:** Include on your fear ladder some things that you can do now with mild anxiety, some things that you can do now with moderate anxiety, and finally some things you find too difficult to do now because of anxiety.

## Step 5: Plan Exposure Exercises

Now that you have your fear ladders, pick one to start working on. On that fear ladder, start with the least scary situation and **repeatedly** enter that situation or do that activity even if you feel anxious.

For example, if you're working on your fear of talking to unfamiliar people, you could make eye contact and say "hi" to the bus driver every day on the way to and from school. Do this for many days until it becomes no big deal. Or if you're working on your fear of touching things you think are dirty, you could touch a doorknob without washing your hands every day.

Expect to feel anxious! That's what happens when we face our fears.

If the situation is one you can stay in for a **long** time, remain there until your anxiety starts to come down. For example, if you fear needles, try looking at a picture of needles until your anxiety comes down. If you stay in a situation long enough, your anxiety will start to come down. This is because anxiety takes a lot of energy, and at some point it will "run out of gas" and you'll realize you are safe and nothing really bad has happened.

This can take a long time (up to 30 minutes or more). So make sure you give yourself enough time to do your exposure exercise.

Once you can face that thing or situation repeatedly without much anxiety, it's time to celebrate your victory and move onto the next thing on your list. If you're bored - you aren't scared! And you should feel some anxiety doing these steps or it's not working.



### Helpful tips for doing exposure exercises:

#### Start small

It's important to start really small and take gradual steps.

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## Practice

In order to overcome your fears, you need to practice often. It's like working out. If you want to be in shape, you need to work out several times a week. When it comes to exposure exercises, the more you do, the faster your fear fades!

Some things can be done daily (such as saying "hi" to three people in the hall), while others can only be done once in a while (such as going on a school trip or to a dance). The more you do something the easier it will become.

## Get help

Facing your fears is not easy. Recruit your friends or family to help you. Let them know what you're working on and get them to cheer you on. Or get them to help with some of your exposure exercises by coming with you or meeting up with you afterwards to share in your victories.

## Keep it up!

Even if you've become comfortable doing something, it's still important to go into those situations from time to time to make sure your fear doesn't creep back. So, if standing on a balcony is easy now, make sure to go stand on one once in awhile.

**Use your imagination.** You can't face some feared situations repeatedly. For example, you probably can't take a flight somewhere every day! But you can use your imagination to help you face it. This is called **imaginal exposure**.

All you have to do is close your eyes and imagine that you are in that situation. Use all your senses - what do you see, feel, hear, smell, taste, and touch? Let yourself get anxious by imagining yourself in that situation and keep imagining being there until your anxiety starts to come down. Then, do the same imaginal exposure again the next day. Keep doing it until you really don't feel much anxiety anymore.



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It can also be helpful to write this situation out on paper or type it up on the computer so you can read it to yourself over and over. For example, if you are afraid of an earthquake happening you could write a short story of about being someplace when an earthquake strikes and how the experience would be for you. Read it over daily until you don't get as anxious when you read it.

**Get creative.** There is lots of great stuff on the Internet that might help you face your fears, such as pictures or videos. Get a family member or trusted friend to check some out for you and then tell you about them to see if it's something you think you could face (like pictures of needles or videos of someone flying).

## Step 6: Track Your Progress

It can help to track your fear during your exposure exercise and to remain in that situation until your anxiety comes down by about 50%. For example, if you were sitting in the cafeteria and you rated that as a 6 out of 10, try to stay there until your anxiety comes down to a 3 out of 10 or lower before leaving to do something else, even if you feel the urge to leave sooner.

Keep doing a specific exposure exercise daily (or as often as you can) until you rate it as a 2 or 3 out of 10 for several days in a row. Then it's time to move on to the next thing on your fear ladder.

 Use the Exposure Sheets to help you track your anxiety and progress.

Re-rate your entire fear ladder every once in a while. You may be surprised that as you make progress with the items at the bottom of the ladder, the situations in the middle and near the top don't seem as scary any more. Your ratings of feared situations will also help you see the progress you have made and figure out what you still need to do to beat your anxiety!

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## Step 7: Reward Yourself!



Let's be honest, facing your fears is not easy. So remember to reward yourself when you do it!

Specific rewards can motivate you to achieve big goals. For example, plan to get yourself a gift (video game, music, clothes, a treat) or to do something fun (go to a concert, a movie, out to dinner) when you finally ask out the person you like or go for that summer job interview.

Talk to your parents and friends to see if they might help you celebrate when you reach an important goal.

Don't forget the power of self-talk. Tell yourself: "I did it!" "That was awesome!" "I rock!" - it feels good!

## Stopping Fears from Creeping Back

### *How can I stop my fears from creeping back?*

Don't be discouraged if your fears start creeping back. This can happen from time to time, especially when you're stressed out (for example, during final exams or after moving to a new home). This is totally normal. It just means you need to start planning some exposure exercises to knock your fears back down again.

Pull out your fear ladders and re-rate the items on the fear scale. Begin with the situation that causes you mild anxiety and start re-entering that situation or facing that thing. You can beat your anxiety again!

Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process and it gets easier over time. You just have to review some of the tools you've learned on this site and start using them again.





Facing Fears Form (Sample)

(Example: Specific Phobia: Driving)

Date: January 12<sup>th</sup>

Exposure Exercise (What fear am I facing?): driving in a residential area

Fear Rating:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10  
No Fear Moderate Fear Extreme  
Fear

Start: 6 End: 3

Length of Time of Exposure: 30 mins

What did I learn? I was scared at first. It did get easier as I kept driving. My anxiety was less this time than yesterday when I did the exposure exercise.

(Example: Social anxiety)

Date: June 27<sup>th</sup>

Exposure Exercise (What fear am I facing?): Asking strangers questions (asked for directions to the post office).

Fear Rating:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10  
No Fear Moderate Fear Extreme  
Fear

Start: 8 End: 4

Length of Time of Exposure: 35 mins – asked 12 people during that time

What did I learn? My anxiety did drop and by the end I wasn't that anxious. Most people were pleasant and helpful – only one person was rude and did not help – so I guess asking for help doesn't necessarily annoy others.

