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**Graded Exposure**

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# Graded Exposure

In this section we will be looking at ways to overcome your anxiety. To get the best out of this you should have a read through the section on '*What is anxiety?*' as this should help you to make more sense of why we use this approach to overcoming anxiety.

In this section we will look at:

- 1. Brief rationale for graded exposure**
- 2. Developing your exposure plan**
  - **2:1 Finding your anxiety baseline**
  - **2:2 Writing your exposure plan**
  - **2:3 Recording and evaluating**
- 3. General principles to remember when executing your plan**
- 4. Worksheets**
  - **Exposure plan worksheet**
  - **Anxiety baseline worksheet**
  - **Exposure task record**

## 1: Brief Rationale for Graded Exposure

The behavioral intervention of graded exposure has been the mainstay of treatment for anxiety since the late 1950's. The aim is to enable you to fully habituate to your current anxiety provoking situations. This will involve you identifying and removing the factors that are maintaining your current problems. As we have already explained, where problems are related to anxiety in some way the key maintenance factors are:

- 1. AVOIDANCE OF ANXIETY TRIGGERS**
- 2. ESCAPE FROM ANXIETY**
- 3. SAFETY BEHAVIOURS THAT LESSEN ANXIETY**

Therefore, to manage and reduce your anxiety will involve facing situations, thoughts, physical sensations and/or emotional sensations (whatever your anxiety triggers are) that have previously been avoided in some way.

In order to achieve this in the most therapeutic manner, a **graded exposure strategy** is used to ensure that you are not overwhelmed with anxiety, BUT at the same time you have the opportunity to “learn” to overcome your fear.

Exposure leads to an initial **increase** in ones anxiety before **decreasing** it through exposure (facing the fear).

## **2: DEVELOPING YOUR EXPOSURE PLAN**

### **2:1 Finding Your Anxiety Baseline**

This involves identifying your anxiety triggers (and whether you currently avoid or face the trigger), identifying any safety behaviors that you use in facing your triggers and finally rating the level of distress each trigger brings for you. Using the form at the end of this section on page 12 (anxiety baseline worksheet) consider the following. *(There is an example one on page 4 that may help you with this too)*

- **Identify Anxiety Triggers**

List the things that you would consider to be anxiety triggers for you. Then write in the next column whether you currently **avoid** this or if you **face** it.

- **Identify Safety Behaviors**

Those anxiety triggers that you face should, after a short time, become less anxiety provoking as you habituate to them. If you are facing them but not habituating to them (that is to say your anxiety response is not lessening with each exposure to it), it is likely that you are engaging in some form of **safety behavior**. This will serve to help you to face the feared scenario, but prevent habituation and hence maintain your anxiety in the longer term.

It is important that we identify your safety behaviors so that we can work on reducing them. For the anxiety triggers that you face, consider any behaviors that you use that help you to cope and reduce your anxiety, and jot these down in the last column (*safety behaviors I use*).

- **Rating Your Distress Levels**

In order to apply a graded approach to your exposure plan we need to identify which triggers would be easier or harder for you to face. The level of distress you experience is dependent not only on the trigger itself but also the effectiveness of your current safety behaviors.

***Avoided Situations***

Look at your list of anxiety triggers and for each of the anxiety triggers that you **avoid**, consider how distressing each one is. Do this using a 0-10 scale (*where 10 represents your highest level of distress and 1 represents your lowest level of distress*). It often helps to ask the question *“If I were to have to face this now how distressed would I be?”*

Jot this figure in the second column (*see the example sheet below*).

***Faced Situations***

Now consider the anxiety triggers that you face. Rate these in the same way in relation to how distressing each would be to face if you did not use any safety behaviors. Again jot these figures down in the second column.

## Anxiety Baseline Worksheet (Example Mandy)

THINGS THAT TRIGGER MY ANXIETY	FACE OR AVOID	SAFETY BEHAVIOURS I USE
<i>Attending meetings at work</i>	<i>Face 8/10</i>	<i>Sit near the door Avoid eye contact Don't speak up Take notes to distract myself</i>
<i>Chatting to work colleagues</i>	<i>Avoid if I can but sometimes have no choice 7/10</i>	<i>Keep to short answers Get away as soon as I can (come up with an excuse to leave) Avoid eye contact Walk the long way to the toilet to reduce the chance of bumping into any one Take a flask of coffee so I don't have to use the communal kitchen (and have to speak to people)</i>
<i>Going to the supermarket</i>	<i>Avoid 8/10</i>	
<i>Going to an indoor shopping centre</i>	<i>Avoid 9/10</i>	
<i>Handing in work to my boss</i>	<i>Face 8/10</i>	<i>Spend excessive time re-checking Get my colleague to check my work</i>

## 2:2 Writing Your Exposure Plan

As we have already mentioned your exposure plan should be graded, starting with exposure to your least feared triggers.

Ideally you would look at facing a trigger, which gives you a distress level of no more than 3 to 4 out of 10. This is sufficient to activate the anxiety, but to a level which should be tolerable for you to face and hence allow sufficient time for learning and habituation.

Repeated regular exposure to this feared trigger would lead to a reduction in anxiety with each exposure, eventually leading to you being able to face the trigger without anxiety.

As the process of exposure involves an initial increase in distress, choosing something that you are motivated to change makes sense. This can either be motivation towards a desired positive outcome (e.g. overcoming your fear of crowds to get to your sons football practice), or motivation away from an unpleasant consequence of not changing (e.g. overcoming your avoidance of social events so that it will help repair current difficulties with your relationship with your partner).

**Exercise:** Have a look over your anxiety baseline worksheet and select a specific goal that you would like to achieve. Jot this down on the exposure plan worksheet on page 13. Consider Mandy for a moment, her goal might be: -

**Goal:** *To be able to go to my local Tesco superstore on my own after work.*

For Mandy this is an 8/10 and she will need to be creative to consider how she might develop an appropriate exposure plan. This will involve adjusting elements of the trigger in order to bring down the distress scale to a more achievable 3 to 4 out of 10.

She will need to think about the factors of the task that make it anxiety provoking for her and look at ways she could adjust it. For example, if her anxiety is related to the number of people around her, she could look at the timing of her visit to the shop, having someone to go with her, or consider the impact of the location and size of the store on her perceived anxiety level. Going to a small supermarket with a friend at a non-busy time may bring it down to a more achievable 4/10. She would then repeat this a handful of times until this felt ok and add back in one of the variables. Perhaps go on her

own, or maybe go at a slightly different time that would be less busy. There is no absolute right or wrong way of doing this, just ensure that the distress level is kept around the 3-4 level.

NOTE: It is important to point out that often adjusting the variables in this way can be seen as actually adding in safety behaviors, which as we have explained can reinforce anxiety. So it's helpful to note this and explain that as long as you are aware of it and are only using them on a temporary basis as part of a planned graded exposure (i.e. gradually reducing them), then this is ok as they can play an important part in helping you develop a realistic exposure plan. Using them in the initial stages of an exposure plan when sometimes all of your anxiety triggers are very high (i.e. all over 4/10) provide the experience of a lower level of exposure but will need to be gradually dropped to enable you to ultimately overcome your anxiety.

If your goal is a trigger that you already face but with a list of safety behaviors, your exposure plan may be to continue to face the trigger but have a planned gradual reduction in the use of your safety behaviours.

If we consider Mandy again we can see that one of the triggers that she faces rather than avoids is attending meetings at work, but that she has many safety behaviors that enable her to do this. In developing an appropriate exposure plan she would need to consider these safety behaviors in detail and look at ways she could reduce them gradually to enable her to find a first step that would bring a 3-4 out of 10 distress level. It may be that she could gradually sit further in from the door, or reduce her note taking as a way of helping her reduce her safety behaviors.

## **2:3 Record and Evaluate**

After each exposure, keep a note of the task on the exposure task record (on page 14), this will help you to monitor your progress and will also identify if you have pitched your exposure plan too high or too low and will prompt you to re-visit your plan so that you can make any adjustments needed.

See Mandy's completed exposure task record on page 8 to help.

## Exposure Plan Worksheet (Example Mandy)

**GOAL:** *To be able to go to my local superstore on my own after work.*

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Distress Level 0-10</b>
<i>Go to the local shop accompanied on a weekday evening after work go in with my friend</i>	<i>3/10</i>
<i>Go to the local shop on my own on weekday evening after work go in on my own</i>	<i>4/10</i>
<i>Go to the local super store accompanied on a weekday morning do not go in but stand at the entrance with my friend</i>	<i>5/10</i>
<i>Go to the local superstore accompanied on weekday morning go in with my friend</i>	<i>6/10</i>
<i>Go to the local super store on my own on a weekday morning go in on my own</i>	<i>7/10</i>
<i>Go to the local supermarket accompanied on weekday evening after work go in with my friend</i>	<i>8/10</i>
<i>Go to the local supermarket on my own on a weekday evening after work go in on my own</i>	<i>9/10</i>

*Note: that during the process of exposure when one level is worked through the distress levels of the next steps will naturally drop down*



## Exposure Task Record (Example Mandy)

DATE	TIME Start Finish	TASK	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER	COMMENTS
14/1/09	6pm- 6:45	Pop into local food shop after work with my friend	5	4	3	Was ok after initial anxiety
6/1/09	6pm- 6:45	Pop into local food shop after work with my friend	2	2	1	Easier this time. Felt I achieved something!
17/1/09	6pm- 6:45	Pop into local food shop after work on my own	3	3	2	Felt a bit flustered but managed to stay with it
19/1/09	8am- 8.45	Went to superstore with friend before work	6	4	4	Was bigger than I thought wanted to leave but managed to stay
20/1/09	8am- 8.45	Went to superstore with friend before work	4	2	2	Much better ready for next step!

### **3: GENERAL PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER WHEN EXECUTING YOUR PLAN**

#### **✓ SYSTEMATIC EXPOSURE TO THE FEARED EVENT**

Your exposure plan should involve the deliberate and planned exposure to your anxiety triggers until the intensity of your distress recedes to a level that is:

- 1: Lower than pre-treatment levels
- 2: Acceptable to you

*This means facing the fear rather than providing an alternative situation that just avoids the fear. The latter may allow you to experience an initial feeling of lower distress but ultimately reinforces the client's anxiety in the long term. Be aware of short-term fixes!*

#### **✓ REPRESENTATION**

The feared event has to be presented or represented for therapeutic purposes.

The stimulus may be presented in reality, in vivo, imaginally, virtually (virtuo), or as part of a writing exercise.

*This could involve imagining entering into any aspect of your feared situations/scenarios, writing about it or real exposure.*

#### **✓ REPEATED OR PROLONGED EXPOSURE**

An essential feature of successfully facing your fear is that the exposure is repeated and/or prolonged within treatment.

*It is important to remember that exposure enables the fear system to learn that the feared trigger is not life threatening. This is best done through prolonged exposure to the perceived threat and allows learning to take place that enables the previous danger perceptions to reduce and diminish. For example, where anxiety about an environment is present, a 45-60 minute physical exposure to that environment will lead the fear response to turn off and a learning experience of the trigger as not dangerous to be established. This will serve to reduce the intensity of the fear response on each repeated exposure to it, thus reducing anxiety.*

### ✓ **RESPONSE PREVENTION**

Avoidance and escape responses function to reduce the exposure process; the consequence is a failure to acquire new learning regarding the stimulus.

*As a general rule you should experience an increase in distress, which then plateaus out and reduces during the exposure period. With each repeated exposure the level of distress should reduce. After several exposures you should begin to feel more relaxed within that situation. If this does not occur you are likely to be engaging in some form of escape that prevents this process (for example distraction, seeking reassurance) or you simply do NOT WANT to be there. If the latter is the case, this is an issue of personal choice and other cognitive behavioral strategies may be more suitable such as problem solving and decision-making.*

### ✓ **FEAR HIERARCHY**

Remember to work through a graded hierarchy of fears from least to most fear evoking.

### ✓ **REDUCTION OF DISTRACTIONS**

The removal of distractions during the exposure process is associated with better treatment outcome.

*This relates to specific coping behaviors that may reduce distress in the short term but ultimately prevent the exposure that is necessary to treat the condition. Some use of distractions may be advocated as a temporary measure to assist in the development of a graded hierarchy but they should be reduced and removed as the plan progresses.*

### ✓ **THE ROLE OF ADJUNCTIVE TREATMENTS**

Where distress is very high in some circumstances the use of medication such as an antidepressant is necessary to help reduce the biological symptoms and help you face fears and remove avoidance factors that are actually maintaining the anxiety or depression. It is important to remember that where medication is used without the component of exposure, the avoidances that maintain anxiety are not removed and you can be vulnerable to relapse (sometimes 12-18 months after finishing medication).

## **SUMMARY**

Many psychological therapies are helpful in guiding us towards recovery from anxiety and/or depression. However, merely talking about problems can be limited if behavioral change is necessary (as is the case for most aspects of anxiety).

Beginning to understand how our anxieties can be maintained and learning that we need to face our fears in the ways described here can be overwhelming and we often find ourselves looking for ways around having to do this. It can seem strange that we have developed elaborate ways of coping that have seemed functional but we now realise may actually be the things that have kept us unwell.

It is “hard work” for us to pull ourselves away from behaviors that have become “habits” and cope with the realization that we often have to “feel worse before feeling better”. However, it’s important to see that through this process of change we can achieve recovery that is often life changing and empowering and enables us to take control over areas of our lives that we believed we had little or no control of.

CBT is however only a vehicle for change, it provides the scientific principles behind why we sometimes stay anxious and gives us the principle and steps towards overcoming our distress. Hopefully the information you have read will provide you with another option and way forward to managing your current anxiety. You will have realised by now though that the process involves active involvement and motivation to address problems and this choice is now yours. But remember the theories of learning and Pavlov’s’ dogs? (*See the section on “What is anxiety?”*). When we avoid anxiety triggers we prevent the natural process of unlearning that the conditioned stimulus (e.g. going to the supermarket) does not lead to the conditioned response (danger).

## **4: WORKSHEETS**



## Exposure Plan Worksheet

**GOAL:**

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Distress Level 0-10</b>

*Note: that during the process of exposure when one level is worked through the distress levels of the next steps will naturally drop down*

## Exposure Task Record

DATE	TIME Start Finish	TASK	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER	COMMENTS