

Graded exposure

Activities for children and young people

What is graded exposure?

Graded exposure is an intervention in cognitive behavioural therapy that helps us to stop avoiding things that we fear. It works through something called habituation.

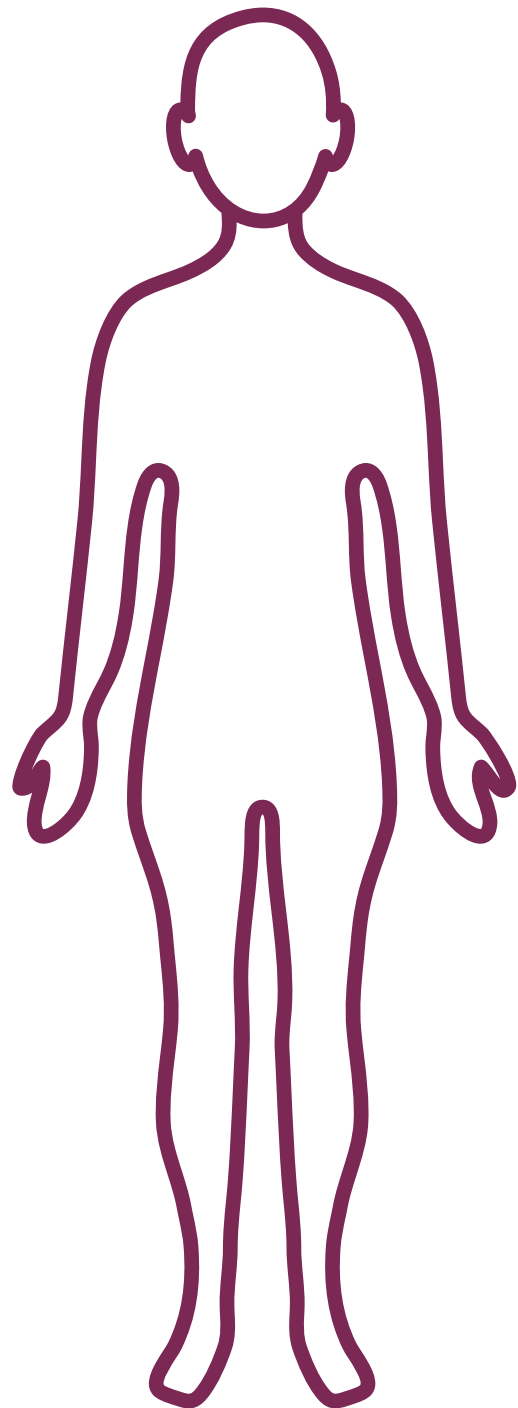
Habituation

When we fear situations, objects or activities, we either avoid or leave the situation to help ourselves feel better. This may be helpful in lowering our worries in the moment, but avoidance can help to maintain this pattern of fear and anxiety. Therefore each time we go into a feared situation we experience the same level of anxiety time after time.

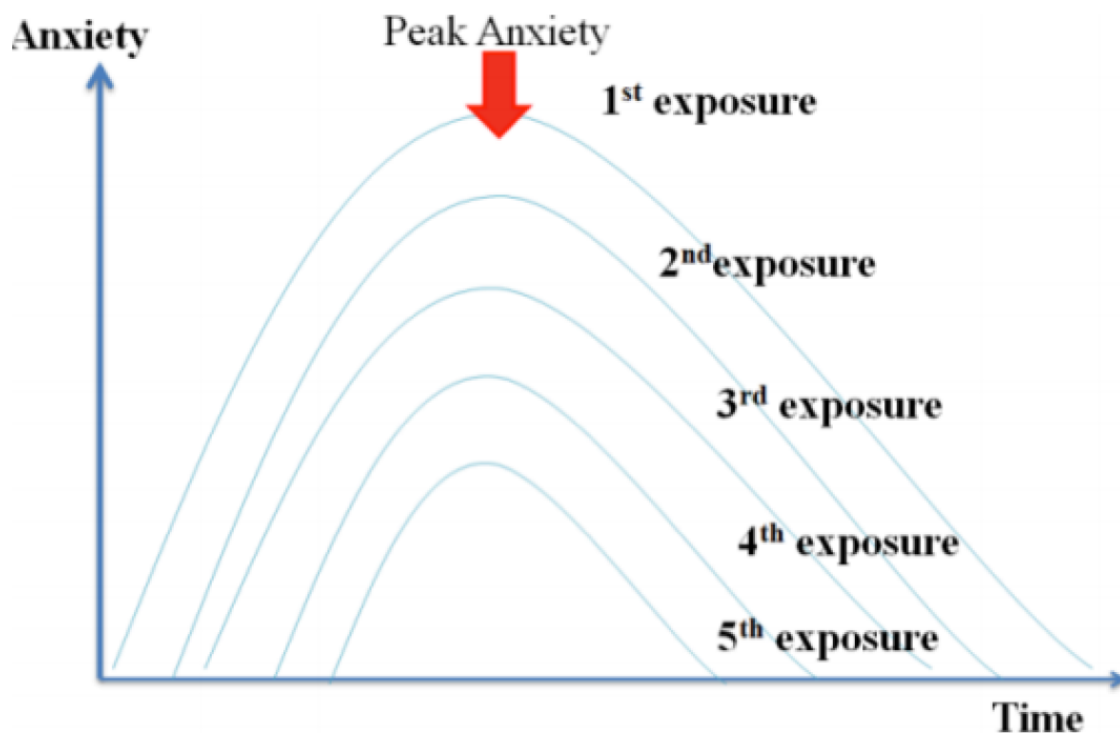
When we're in those situations, our bodies start to feel the 'fight, flight or freeze' symptoms such as sweaty palms and a fast heartbeat but our bodies can't keep these feelings going for very long, so by exposing ourselves to the situation our anxiety naturally reduces, this is the process of habituation.

Physical sensations

Use the body map to label the physical symptoms you experience when feeling worried or anxious. Use arrows to identify where on your body you feel these sensations.



Understanding anxiety



- What would happen if you left the situation at the height of your anxiety?
- How would you feel the next time you were in this situation?

Identifying anxious situations

The first step of graded exposure is to identify all the activities that cause you anxiety and are therefore either avoiding, leaving or distracting yourself.

Write a list below, including what, where, when and with whom each situation occurs.



A writing area consisting of ten horizontal blue lines for text, bounded by two vertical red lines on the left and right sides. A pencil icon is positioned at the top right of the writing area.

Create a fear hierarchy

Next we can create a fear hierarchy, we will do this by rating your fear of each situation/activity you've listed, and then arranging them from the least fearful to the most fearful.

Use the thermometer on the next page to help you rate each activity and write your ratings on your list.

Write your list in order of the most fearful situation to the least from top to bottom. This is like a ladder, you start at the bottom with the least scary situations and climb up to the top, where the most scary things are.

Goal planning

Define the fear and think about situations/activities usually avoided and make a list of these. Rate them in terms of fear/distress from 0-100 (or 0-10):

- **0 - 24** - You are perfectly relaxed
- **25 - 49** - Mild: you can still cope with the situation
- **50 - 64** - Moderate: you are distracted by the anxiety, but are still aware of what's happening
- **65 - 84** - High: difficult to concentrate, thinking about how to escape
- **85 - 100** - Extreme: the anxiety is overwhelming and you just want to escape from the situation

Subjective units of distress (SUDS) scale

100: Unbearably upset to the point that you cannot function and may be on the verge of a breakdown

90: Extremely anxious and desperate, helpless and unable to handle it

80: Worried and panicky; losing focus and feeling anxious in the body

70: Discomfort dominates your thoughts and you struggle to function normally

60: Moderate to strong levels of discomfort

50: Upset and uncomfortable; still functional

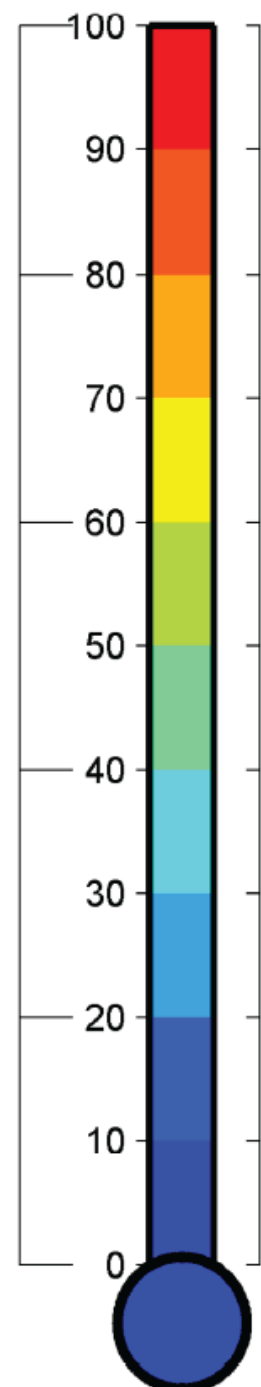
40: Mild to moderate anxiety and worry

30: Worried or upset; still able to function

20: A little bit sad or distressed

10: No distress; alert and focused

0: Peace and complete calm



Fear hierarchy development

Create a list of all the activities/situations that have been rated.

Put the most feared activity at the top of the list, then grade the rest, with the least feared activity at the bottom.

Plan carefully: select an activity that feels manageable to start from

SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic and resourced
- Time limited

All activities must have 50% fear rating at the start.

Facing my fears

An important step of graded exposure is to begin exposing yourself to feared situations, starting with the least anxiety-provoking. When planning to face your fears, it is important to make a specific plan based on the four conditions of graded exposure.

These conditions are:

Graded: start with the least scary situation and working up to the scariest.

Prolonged: It is important that we remain in the feared situation for long enough until anxiety naturally reduces through the process of habituation.

Without Distraction: its important to let yourself feel the fear, free of distractions.

Repeated: In order for habituation in a specific situation to occur we need to repeatedly expose ourselves, try to repeat them until your fear rating falls below 40% at the start of the exercise.

Exposure exercise:					
Date and time of exercise:	Exposure ratings			Minutes	Comments
	Before	During	After		

Fear rating			
0- No fear	25- mild	50- moderate	75- severe
			100-very severe



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howareyoufeeling.org.uk