

Feared Situation Hierarchy

Break it down. Start small. Build confidence.

Avoidance can bring immediate relief from anxiety, but over time it can teach the brain that the situation really was too dangerous or unbearable to face. A feared-situation hierarchy helps you break a fear into graded, manageable steps so that you can practise approaching rather than automatically avoiding.

The aim is not to force yourself into the hardest situation. It is to create a ladder that begins with something challenging but manageable and gradually moves towards the things you most want to be able to do.

What is a hierarchy?

A hierarchy is a list of situations connected with a fear, ordered from lower anxiety to higher anxiety. Each situation receives a SUDS rating — Subjective Units of Distress — usually from 0 to 100.

0 = no distress **25** = mild **50** = moderate **75** = high **100** = the highest distress you can imagine.

Learning rather than proving

Exposure practice is not a test of bravery and does not require anxiety to reach zero. The useful question is: *What did I learn by staying with this situation and responding differently?*

Build My Fear Ladder

Choose one broad fear or avoided area. Then think of different versions of the situation. Change distance, duration, location, who is present, how much support you have, or how difficult the task is.

The situation or fear I want to work on:

Step	Feared situation	Expected anxiety 0–100
1 — Smallest manageable step		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10 — Longer-term goal		

A useful starting point

Many people begin somewhere around 30–50/100: enough anxiety for new learning, but not so much that the step feels impossible. This is flexible — choose what is manageable for you.

Make Each Step Specific

“Face my fear” is too broad. A hierarchy works better when each step describes exactly what you will practise.

Instead of...	Make it specific...
Go out more	Walk to the end of my road and back
Use public transport	Sit on a bus for one stop at a quieter time
Talk to people	Say hello to a familiar shop assistant
Drive again	Sit in the parked car, then later drive around the block
Go into busy places	Enter the shop for five minutes at a quieter time

Safety behaviours

Sometimes we enter a feared situation but rely on behaviours designed to prevent catastrophe or reduce anxiety — repeatedly checking exits, seeking reassurance, carrying unnecessary “just in case” items, mentally rehearsing, distracting constantly, or only entering with a particular person. Some supports are genuinely necessary; others may prevent new learning.

Supports I genuinely need:

Safety behaviours I may be able to reduce gradually:

Exposure Practice Record

Repeat steps often enough to learn something new. You do not have to wait until anxiety disappears before moving on.

Date	Situation / step	Before 0–100	Peak 0–100	After 0–100	What I learned

Prediction versus outcome

Before: What did I predict would happen?

After: What actually happened?

What did I cope with that I thought I could not?

Success is approach, not calmness

You can complete a successful practice while still feeling anxious. The achievement is choosing to approach, remain present and learn — not producing a perfectly calm nervous system.

When a Step Feels Too Big

A difficult step does not mean you have failed. It may simply need to be divided again.

Ways to make a step smaller

- shorten the time
- increase the distance from the feared situation
- choose a quieter or more predictable setting
- observe before participating
- practise with appropriate support before practising independently
- repeat an earlier step
- create an in-between step that was missing

My step that feels too large:

Three smaller versions:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Review the learning

What am I discovering about anxiety? _____

What am I discovering about my ability to cope? _____

Which safety behaviour have I reduced? _____

What would I like to practise next? _____

Important

A hierarchy should not ask you to expose yourself to genuine danger. Exposure for trauma, OCD, severe panic, eating disorders or complex health-related fears may need specialist guidance so that the exercise targets avoidance safely and appropriately.

A Message From Me

Fear often tells you that you need to feel ready before you take the next step.

But confidence frequently grows the other way around. We take a manageable step while some fear is still present, discover what happens, and gradually build confidence from experience.

Your hierarchy does not need to look impressive. The first step may seem tiny to somebody else. What matters is that it is meaningful for you.

Try not to race towards the top of the ladder. Give yourself the opportunity to learn at each stage. Repeat things. Adjust them. Add extra steps when you need them.

And notice more than your anxiety score. Notice that you stayed. Notice that you coped with uncertainty. Notice that you did something you had been avoiding. Notice when the feared prediction did not happen — and when something difficult did happen but you managed it.

Braver does not mean never feeling afraid. Sometimes it means taking the next manageable step while fear comes with you.

Space to Breathe Therapy

This resource is for psychoeducation and self-reflection. Exposure work should never involve genuine danger. Seek appropriately qualified professional support where needed.