

IMAGINAL EXPOSURE

A guided phobia resource for approaching feared outcomes with care

Imaginal exposure is not about forcing yourself through fear. It is a structured way of approaching a feared image, situation or predicted outcome so that the brain has an opportunity to learn something new. It should be gradual, purposeful and safe.

Understanding imaginal exposure

When we are frightened of something, avoidance can feel protective. We may avoid the place, object, sensation or situation itself, but we can also avoid thinking about it. We might distract ourselves, seek reassurance, mentally check, suppress images or repeatedly tell ourselves that the feared event will not happen. These responses can reduce anxiety in the moment, but they can also keep the fear powerful because the brain never has the opportunity to discover that anxiety can be tolerated or that its prediction may not unfold as expected.

Imaginal exposure involves intentionally bringing a feared scenario to mind and staying with it for a planned period rather than immediately escaping from it. It can be particularly useful when the feared outcome cannot easily be recreated in real life, when the fear centres on a catastrophic prediction, or as preparation for carefully graded real-life exposure.

What might it help with?

It may form part of treatment for specific phobias and other anxiety difficulties. For example, somebody afraid of flying may imagine boarding and remaining on an aircraft; somebody who fears panic may imagine experiencing sensations in a public place; somebody with a fear of making mistakes may imagine an error being noticed. The exact exercise should be connected to the person's own fear formulation rather than being a generic frightening story.

Why avoidance can maintain fear

Avoidance teaches the nervous system, 'I escaped, therefore the danger must have been real.' Exposure creates a different learning opportunity: 'I experienced fear and stayed present; the feeling changed; I could cope; I did not need every safety behaviour; uncertainty was uncomfortable but survivable.' The aim is not simply to make anxiety disappear. Useful learning can occur even when some anxiety remains.

Before you start

- Choose one clearly defined fear and identify what you predict will happen.
- Begin with a level that is challenging but manageable rather than the most overwhelming scenario.
- Decide how long you will practise and where you will do it.
- Notice safety behaviours such as reassurance, distraction, checking, mental neutralising or leaving the image early.
- Plan repetition. One attempt rarely tells the whole story.
- Do not deliberately expose yourself or another person to genuine danger.

Extra care: If the feared material is linked to trauma, dissociation, severe distress, significant risk or experiences that feel difficult to contain, seek professional guidance before using exposure independently.

PRACTISING IMAGINAL EXPOSURE

A step-by-step approach

1. Name the fear

Write one specific sentence. Rather than 'I am scared of lifts', you might choose: 'I imagine the lift doors closing and being unable to get out for two floors.' Specific targets make it easier to notice what you are predicting and what you learn.

2. Identify the feared outcome

Ask yourself: What do I believe will happen? What would be the worst part? What am I afraid I would feel, do, lose or be unable to cope with? This helps separate the trigger from the meaning your mind has attached to it.

3. Build the scene

Imagine the situation from your own point of view and in the present tense. Include relevant sights, sounds, sensations and thoughts. Keep it realistic. The purpose is not to exaggerate the scene to make yourself more frightened.

4. Stay with the experience

Notice anxiety without treating it as an emergency. If you normally change the image, reassure yourself, check, distract or mentally escape, gently notice that urge. Where appropriate and safe, experiment with reducing those behaviours so that new learning has room to occur.

5. Track, but do not chase, anxiety

You can rate distress from 0-10 before, during and after practice. Ratings are information, not a pass or fail score. Exposure can still be useful if anxiety does not fall dramatically. The important questions are: What did I learn? Was I able to remain present? Did my prediction change?

6. Repeat and review

Repeated practice can make the learning stronger. Work with the same scenario more than once before deciding it has 'not worked'. When a step becomes more manageable, consider the next step on your fear ladder.

Creating a fear ladder

Break the larger fear into smaller situations and give each an anticipated fear rating. For example, looking at a photograph may be easier than watching a video; imagining being near the feared object may be easier than imagining direct contact. A ladder is individual - another person's ratings do not determine yours.

Remember: progress is not measured by never feeling afraid. Progress may look like staying for longer, using fewer safety behaviours, recovering more quickly, becoming more willing to try again, or allowing uncertainty without needing immediate reassurance.

YOUR IMAGINAL EXPOSURE WORKSHEET

Use this as a guided reflection before and after practice.

The fear or situation I am working on
What I predict will happen
What I fear this would mean
What I imagine seeing, hearing or feeling
My distress before practice (0-10)
What I notice happening in my body
What I want to do to escape, check or seek reassurance
What happened when I stayed with the image
My distress afterwards (0-10)
What I learned that I did not know before
What I want to repeat or change next time

Afterwards, give yourself a few minutes to reorient to the present. Notice your surroundings, move your body if that helps, and acknowledge the effort involved. Avoid turning the review into a demand that you 'should have done better'.

BOOKS, RESOURCES & A MESSAGE FROM ME

Further information and support

Recommended reading

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook - Edmund J. Bourne. A broad practical workbook covering anxiety, phobias, coping strategies and behavioural change.

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley. A CBT-based guide to understanding anxiety patterns and developing practical ways of responding differently.

Facing Your Fears - David Tolin. A practical introduction to understanding fear and exposure-based approaches.

Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life - Steven C. Hayes with Spencer Smith. An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based book about changing our relationship with difficult thoughts and feelings.

Trauma and Recovery - Judith Herman. A wider trauma text that can help readers understand why safety, pacing and context matter when fear is connected to traumatic experience.

Useful UK resources

NHS: information about phobias, anxiety and access to NHS Talking Therapies. **Mind:** mental-health information and support. **Anxiety UK:** information and support relating to anxiety disorders. A GP or appropriately qualified therapist can help you consider whether exposure-based treatment is suitable for your circumstances.

A message from me

Fear can quietly make life smaller. It can convince us that avoiding something is the only way to stay safe, even when another part of us wants more freedom. You do not need to tackle the biggest fear first, and you do not have to prove anything. Small, carefully chosen steps matter. The aim is not to become a person who never feels afraid; it is to learn that fear does not have to make every decision for you. Give yourself permission to go at a pace that keeps you engaged, and reach for support when you need it.

Maggie Learoyd
Space to Breathe Therapy

Clinical information and sources

This guide reflects established principles from cognitive behavioural therapy and exposure-based treatment. Contemporary exposure models emphasise new learning rather than simply waiting for fear to disappear. NICE guidance recommends psychological interventions including CBT approaches for a range of anxiety presentations, while individual assessment remains important. The resource is for psychoeducation and guided self-reflection and is not a substitute for personalised clinical care.

Suggested professional sources: NICE guidance on anxiety disorders and NHS information on phobias; Craske and colleagues' work on inhibitory learning and exposure therapy; established CBT texts on anxiety and phobia treatment.