

MY GRADED EXPOSURE HIERARCHY

Turning one overwhelming fear into chosen, repeatable steps

A fear hierarchy is not about pushing yourself to the top as quickly as possible. It is a way of breaking a fear into smaller situations so you can practise approaching what matters at a pace that allows learning to take place.

What is graded exposure?

Graded exposure is commonly used within cognitive behavioural approaches for phobias and anxiety. Instead of avoiding the feared object or situation completely - or attempting the most difficult challenge immediately - you identify a range of related situations and arrange them from more manageable to more challenging.

Why use a hierarchy?

A hierarchy makes fear more specific. 'I want to stop being afraid of dogs' can feel enormous. A hierarchy might separate this into looking at a drawing, looking at a photograph, watching a video, seeing a dog from across a park, standing closer to a calm dog and eventually choosing more direct contact. The exact steps and order are personal.

Fear ratings

People often rate anticipated anxiety or distress on a 0-10 scale, where 0 means no fear and 10 represents the highest level they can imagine. The rating is a guide, not a test. Two people may rate the same situation very differently.

Choose meaningful steps

A useful first step is usually challenging enough to create some fear but manageable enough that you can remain engaged. Starting too high may feel overwhelming; starting so low that there is no fear may offer little new learning. You can adjust the hierarchy as you discover what situations actually feel like.

Repetition matters

Repeating a step can help the brain gather new information. The aim is not necessarily to wait until anxiety reaches zero. Modern exposure approaches focus on learning: noticing that you can tolerate anxiety, discovering whether feared predictions happen, and reducing reliance on unnecessary safety behaviours.

Consent, control and safety

You choose the steps. Exposure should not involve surprises, humiliation, coercion or genuine danger. A hierarchy can be paused, changed or supported by a professional. Where fear relates to trauma, medical risk, allergy, swallowing difficulty or another complex issue, appropriate assessment matters before exposure is attempted.

BUILDING YOUR HIERARCHY

From the larger goal to smaller, workable steps

1. Decide what greater freedom would look like

Start with your reason for change. Perhaps you want to travel, attend medical appointments, walk through a park, use a lift, eat with other people or feel less controlled by avoidance. A personally meaningful goal makes the hierarchy more than a list of frightening tasks.

2. Brainstorm situations

Write down as many variations of the fear as possible. Change distance, duration, predictability, whether you are alone or supported, the intensity of the trigger, and the amount of control you have. Do not worry about the order yet.

3. Give each situation a fear rating

Estimate a 0-10 fear level. This is your rating, not what somebody else thinks you 'should' feel. You can change the score after trying a step.

4. Put the steps in order

Arrange the situations from more manageable to more challenging. There may be several steps at similar levels. A hierarchy is flexible rather than fixed.

5. Practise one step

Choose a step you are willing to try. Stay long enough to notice what happens rather than escaping immediately when anxiety rises. Where safe and appropriate, notice reassurance, checking or other safety behaviours and consider gradually reducing them.

6. Review the learning

Ask: What did I predict? What actually happened? What did I discover about the situation, my anxiety and my ability to cope? What would I like to repeat?

7. Move forward when ready

Progress does not have to be perfectly linear. Some days a familiar step may feel harder. Repeating or temporarily stepping down is not failure. The purpose is to build a body of experiences that gives fear less authority.

Examples of ways to grade a step

You can vary **distance, time, intensity, predictability, support, location** or **level of interaction**. For example: seeing a spider illustration may differ from a photograph; standing outside a lift differs from entering it; watching an aircraft differs from boarding one.

Progress, not perfection: Success may mean attempting a step, staying a little longer, using fewer safety behaviours, recovering after anxiety, repeating the practice, or choosing to return after a difficult attempt.

MY EXPOSURE HIERARCHY WORKSHEET

Build your own ladder and record what you learn

Step	Situation / exposure	Fear 0-10	What I predict
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Practice review

What step did I practise?
What did I expect to happen?
What actually happened?
What did I notice in my body?
Which safety behaviours or reassurance did I use?
What did I learn?
What will I repeat or try next?

SUPPORT, BOOKS & A MESSAGE FROM ME

Keep the hierarchy flexible, meaningful and yours

When professional support can help

Consider support when fear severely restricts daily life, exposure feels impossible to plan alone, panic is intense, the fear is linked with trauma, or genuine medical and safety issues need to be distinguished from anxiety. A qualified therapist can help develop an individual formulation and hierarchy.

Recommended reading

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook - Edmund J. Bourne. Practical exercises and information for understanding anxiety and phobias.

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley. A CBT-based guide to understanding anxiety cycles and changing maintaining patterns.

Facing Your Fears - David Tolin. Practical guidance around fear and exposure.

Overcoming Specific Phobia - Martin M. Antony, Michelle M. Craske and David H. Barlow. A focused treatment resource drawing on established exposure principles.

Useful UK resources

NHS: information about phobias and NHS Talking Therapies. **Mind:** information and mental-health support. **Anxiety UK:** information and support relating to anxiety disorders.

A message from me

When a fear feels enormous, looking only at the final goal can make change feel impossible. I prefer to think about the next step, not the whole staircase. Your hierarchy belongs to you. A step that looks tiny to somebody else may represent a huge amount of courage, learning and effort for you. You are allowed to repeat steps, change the order and recognise progress that is not immediately visible. The aim is not to race towards the top or prove that you are no longer afraid. It is to gradually create more choice, more confidence and more freedom in your life.

Maggie Learoyd
Space to Breathe Therapy

Clinical information and sources

Graded exposure is an established component of cognitive behavioural treatment for specific phobias and other anxiety presentations. Contemporary exposure research emphasises expectancy violation and inhibitory learning: creating experiences that help new, less threatening associations develop rather than relying only on fear reduction during a session.

Suggested professional sources: NHS information on phobias; NICE guidance relevant to anxiety disorders; Craske and colleagues' research on inhibitory learning and exposure therapy; clinical work by Barlow, Antony and colleagues on anxiety and specific phobias.

Information note: This guide is educational and does not replace individual psychological or medical assessment. Exposure should never involve genuine danger or deliberate exposure to a known allergen or medical risk.