Feared Situation Hierarchy

A readable guide to graded exposure | Read first, practise at your own pace

What a fear hierarchy does

Avoidance can reduce anxiety in the moment, yet sometimes make safe situations feel harder over time. A fear hierarchy breaks a personally meaningful, objectively safe activity into smaller steps. Graded exposure is about learning through manageable, repeated practice; it is not a test of courage or a race to the top.

Use the 0-100 SUDS scale

SUDS means Subjective Units of Distress. Use 0 for no distress and 100 for the highest distress you can imagine. It is your own scale, not a comparison with somebody else. Record a score before, at the highest point and after practice. Distress does not have to reach zero for the experience to be useful.

Choose a starting point

Write down your overall aim, then list ten steps from less demanding to more demanding. Make each step specific: where, with whom, how long, and what you will do. Choose a starting step that feels manageable with appropriate support. If you are unsure or distress is intense, work with a qualified clinician.

An example of smaller steps

For fear of speaking in an ordinary, safe group: write down one question; practise saying it aloud alone; practise with a trusted person; ask a short question in a small supportive meeting; gradually work towards speaking in a larger group. A person can repeat or rearrange steps as needed.

Support versus safety behaviours

Useful supports include disability adjustments, communication aids, a trusted person, rest and agreed professional support. Keep these. A safety behaviour is a habit used chiefly to prevent a feared but unlikely outcome, such as needless repeated checking. Exploring whether a habit is maintaining fear should be done thoughtfully; never remove essential safety measures.

What to record

Before a practice, write your prediction and your SUDS rating. Afterwards, record what actually happened, your peak and after ratings, what surprised you and what you learned. Note circumstances that influenced the outcome. A step can be repeated or made smaller. Progress includes noticing, planning and adapting.

Repeating and adjusting

The aim is to build flexible learning, not to force yourself to endure severe distress. A difficult practice may be broken into in-between steps, postponed or discussed with a clinician. Success is not measured only by lower anxiety or by reaching the top of the ladder.

Important safety guidance

Do not use this worksheet to expose yourself to actual danger, abuse, discrimination, medical risk, unsafe food or substances, or situations where consent or safeguarding is a concern. Do not stop medication, discard essential supports or ignore professional advice. Trauma-related fears, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, severe panic, eating disorders and significant distress can require adapted, professionally supported approaches.

A message from Maggie

Confidence often grows through experience, but you do not have to force yourself forward. Choose a manageable step, notice what happens, and adjust with kindness when necessary. Being frightened does not erase the effort you have made.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Feared Situation Hierarchy

Printable worksheets - complete later, at your own pace

Worksheet 1 | My goal and starting point

My personally meaningful goal

Why this matters to me

What makes a safe, manageable start?

My usual supports and adjustments

SUDS scale: 0 = no distress, 100 = maximum distress. This is a personal rating, not a test.

Worksheet 2 | My ten-step fear ladder

Write specific, objectively safe steps. Record an anticipated SUDS rating. You can reorder, repeat or add steps.

Step	Specific situation or action	Expected SUDS
1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
5	_____	_____
6	_____	_____
7	_____	_____
8	_____	_____
9	_____	_____
10	_____	_____

Worksheet 3 | Exposure practice record

Step and date

My prediction before practising

SUDS before / peak / after (0-100)

What actually happened?

What did I learn about my prediction or ability to cope?

What support or adaptations helped?

Repeat, adjust, or take an in-between step?

Worksheet 4 | Progress and reflection

A step I approached or considered

What was different from my prediction?

What felt difficult?

Does any step need dividing into smaller pieces?

What help or adjustments would make the next practice manageable?

A small achievement or something I learned

My next chosen step, or my decision to pause

Safety reminder

Practise only objectively safe, consensual activities. Keep necessary adaptations and medical precautions. Seek specialist support where exposure could involve trauma, significant distress or health risks.