

Overcoming Avoidance: Exposure

Avoidance is the most common behaviour associated with anxiety. When we avoid a difficult situation, we initially experience a decrease in anxiety. This relief we feel is quite rewarding, and this makes us more likely to want to continue avoiding in the future. Ironically, the more we avoid a situation, the more anxious we become about facing it in the future. In this way, avoidance actually fuels anxiety in the long run, because it helps convince us that the dangers we fear are serious and we aren't capable of coping with them.

To overcome anxiety, we need to learn to approach the situations or people we avoid. Through these experiences, we have an opportunity to increase our confidence in our ability to cope with the situations that frighten us. Learning to approach and cope with situations in which we feel anxious is a lasting and powerful way of decreasing our anxiety. Approaching our fears and coping with them is called "exposure." Generally speaking, the more exposure experiences you have, the less sensitive your anxiety alarm becomes. That is, when you go into anxiety-provoking situations more often, your anxiety alarm system learns not to see these situations as so dangerous. Making your alarm less sensitive by repeated exposure for gradually increasing time periods is called "desensitization." In the next section, you learn to make a Fear Ladder to help you personalize your plans for exposure, so you can overcome your fears as quickly as possible.

Making a Hierarchy or Fear Ladder

When you experience high levels of anxiety, it is helpful to develop a hierarchy of the situations, events, or people you fear. A "hierarchy" is a list, written in order of fear intensity, with the most feared situation or event at the top and the least feared situation at the bottom. You can think of it as a "Fear Ladder" on which the lowest step describes a situation in which you experience a small amount of fear, and each step up the ladder represents situations in which you experience greater degrees of fear. Start to approach situations at the bottom of the ladder first, and work your way up the steps gradually, rising up the ladder as you successfully master events until you can do them with only a medium amount of anxiety. You will stay on each step and continue with exposure practice until you become confident that you can handle that step and you learn to tolerate whatever level of anxiety you experience. By gradually approaching what you fear, you will also gather evidence about the accuracy of your catastrophic expectations and your ability to cope.

As an example, Juanita was nervous when she was asked to give a presentation at the next city council meeting. She usually avoided speaking in front of groups because she felt so anxious. To overcome her anxiety and avoidance, Juanita made a Fear Ladder that looked like the one shown in Figure 14.4 on the next page.

7	Rate anxiety (0-100) where 0 = no anxiety and 100 = full panic	
6		↓
5	Speak at the city council meeting	95
4	Meet privately with one council member to present my ideas	90
3	Give my speech to family and friends	70
2	Practice the presentation at home alone	50
1	Write the speech	40
Figure 14.4 Juanita's Fear ladder		

Starting with situation 1 at the bottom of her Fear Ladder, Juanita successfully met the challenges of each situation on her Fear Ladder by combining relaxation methods, cognitive restructuring, and Action Plans to solve problems that might occur. Juanita did not proceed to the next situation on her Fear Ladder until she could approach the current one with tolerable anxiety and increased confidence. She practiced step 4 (Meet privately with one council member to present my ideas) — a step that could not be easily repeated numerous times — in her imagination until she felt confident she could do this in person. While Juanita experienced some anxiety when she actually gave her presentation to the City Council, she was not nearly as anxious as she had been in similar situations in the past. She credited her success to her step-by-step practice. Furthermore, as Juanita walked to the podium, she reminded herself how well she had done the speech in practice. By using different methods in combination, Juanita was able to give a public speech, something she had previously avoided.

Juanita used a Fear Ladder to help her approach public speaking but sometimes there is not just a single event coming up that makes us anxious, but a whole collection of situations and experiences. For example, Paul avoided a variety of situations in which he feared he might have a panic attack. He avoided driving alone, being too far from home, getting onto elevators, sitting in the middle of a row of seats, and being in crowded places. All these situations made Paul anxious, and he was afraid he would have a panic attack if he approached and stayed in them. Paul thought about which of these situations were the most difficult for him, and then made the Fear Ladder shown in Figure 14.5 on the next page

		Rate anxiety (0-100)
7	Drive 5, 10, 15, 25, 50 miles from home by myself	80-100
6	Drive alone for 5, 10, 20, 40 minutes	75-95
5	Ride a crowded elevator 1, 2, 5, 10 floors	70-85
4	Ride an uncrowded elevator 1, 2, 5, 10 floors	60-75
3	Spend time in various crowded spaces	60
2	Sit in the middle of a row of seats	50
1	Sit two or three seats from the end of a row of seats	40
Figure 14.5 Paul's Fear ladder		

Notice that Paul planned many more steps on his Fear Ladder than Juanita needed to plan. For each of Paul's steps, he planned a variety of exposure experiments that were gradually more challenging for him. For example, when in a movie theatre or at a sports event, he first sat just a few seats from the aisle (step 1) and gradually moved to the centre as his confidence grew (step 2). For steps 3 through 7, he began each step at an easier point. Once his exposure was successful (i.e., he was able to stay in the situation as long as necessary to manage his anxiety), he increased the time or intensity of the experience. So, for example, he rode an elevator many times, increasing the number of floors until he could ride to the top of the building. Once he could do this in an uncrowded elevator, he added the challenge of doing this at a busy time when the elevators were quite crowded. It might seem that it would take Paul a very long time to take all these steps on his Fear Ladder, but actually he was able to complete many exposure challenges successfully in a single day — so he reached the top of the ladder in a few months, faster than he expected.

EXERCISE: Making Your Fear Ladder (see next page):

Using Your Fear Ladder to Overcome Anxiety and Avoidance

Once you make your Fear Ladder, you are ready to begin to approach your fears (exposure) and learn to manage your anxiety. You have control over how quickly or slowly you proceed up the ladder. Your exposure to each step on the ladder is up to you; you should not feel pushed or pressured to go faster than you believe you can. Having a sense of control over the speed at which you work is likely to help you lower your anxiety and overcome avoidance more quickly.

Moving up a Fear Ladder is never comfortable. But people who are willing to tolerate the temporary discomfort of moving up their Fear Ladders get over their anxiety more quickly. Just as avoidance leads to short-term relief and long-term increase in anxiety, exposure to the steps on your Fear Ladder leads to short-term discomfort and long-term relief from anxiety. Therefore, you should spend as much time as possible working on your Fear Ladder.

If you find that even the least feared situation on your Fear Ladder seems too difficult, you can either break down that step into smaller parts or begin with imagery practice. Imagery practice is simply picturing yourself spending time on the step.

It is often helpful to imagine the situation in great detail. For example, Juanita looked at photos of city council members she planned to visit and thought about the expressions on their faces. She imagined how she would feel shaking their hands and sitting in their offices. She even imagined her voice shaking a bit when she began to speak. She found it helpful to imagine these meetings in two ways: sometimes when everything went smoothly, and other times when she stumbled on her words and felt quite embarrassed. By imagining both easy and difficult circumstances, she was able to plan ways to handle the meetings no matter what happened. This increased her confidence.

Once you are comfortable with the situation in imagination, you can enter the situation in reality. As Juanita's experience demonstrates, it is helpful to use as many of the five senses as possible when doing exposure in your imagination. Imagine what you will see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. It is also helpful to imagine what you might be thinking, feeling, and doing in the situation. Some people find it helpful to write down or digitally record their imagined exposure. In this way, you can either listen to the recording or read what you've written to increase the number of exposures and move up the Fear Ladder more quickly.

How do you know when to move from one step on the Fear Ladder to the next? You don't need your anxiety to go away completely (a rating of 0). In fact, most people will continue to have some anxiety until they have faced the situations they fear many times. The goal is to get your anxiety to a tolerable level. For most people, a good guideline is to stay on each step until the anxiety decreases by more than half or drops below a rating of 40 on the 0-100 scale.

If you have trouble staying in the situation, you can use some of the coping skills mentioned at the end of this article to help you stay on each ladder step for longer periods of time. Sometimes a supportive spouse/partner or friend can help you become more willing and motivated to face the steps on your Fear Ladder. If you want a helper, choose someone you trust who understands the nature of your fears and avoidance. This person can serve as an empathic source of motivation and support as you do initially difficult activities. Ideally, you will later face your fears on your own as easily as you do with a helper present.

You should expect that your anxiety will increase when you first begin to approach on your Fear Ladder. This is a good sign that you are facing your fears. Alternatively, if there is no anxiety, then either you are not taking big enough steps to face your fears, or you are relying too much on safety behaviours. In addition, for each step of your Fear Ladder, you are learning to tolerate anxiety as you stay in the situation longer. The more you do this, the easier it will become for you to experience anxiety and move up the steps of your Fear Ladder. Ironically, as we become more comfortable with anxiety, our anxiety often decreases. In order to successfully approach and stay in feared situations, use the skills described below to manage your anxiety while you work on your Fear Ladder.

It is normal to want to leave or avoid situations when you feel anxious. As you have already learned, it is important to overcome this tendency and stay in situations so you learn to tolerate your anxiety and discover that you are capable of handling the challenges of your fear.

There are a number of things you can do. It is important to use these skills to stay in the situations on your Fear Ladder. You don't want to use these skills as safety behaviours to protect you from dangers you fear, or as ways to try to eliminate anxiety. Instead, the goal is to use anxiety management strategies to reduce anxiety to a level you can tolerate and still stay in the situation.

- Mindfulness and Acceptance
- Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relation
- Imagery work (as described above)

Adapted from 'Mind Over Mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think' (Second Edition 2016) by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky.