

Situational exposure

One of the ways that people avoid feeling anxiety in certain situations is to avoid those situations wherever possible. However, by not exposing yourself to those situations you don't get the chance to disconfirm your fears, which in turn can make those fears even stronger. If being in those situations is important to you, you will need to face your fears in a real situation and begin to turn social activity into a positive experience. This information sheet is designed to show you how you can begin to do that.

Graded Exposure

Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to “jump in the deep end” and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it “step-by-step”, what some people call “**graded exposure**”. By using graded exposure you start with situations that are easier for you to handle, then work your way up to more challenging tasks. This allows you to build your confidence slowly, to use other skills you have learned, to get used to the situations, and to challenge your fears about each situational exposure exercise. By doing this in a structured and repeated way, you have a good chance of reducing your anxiety about those situations.

Situations That You Avoid

The first thing to do is to think about the situations that you fear and try to avoid. For example, some people might fear and avoid going to social places, or being assertive with others. Make a list of these situations.

Once you have made the list, indicate how much distress you feel in those situations by giving them each a rating on a scale of 0 to 100.

0 – You are perfectly relaxed

25-49 – *Mild*: You can still cope with the situation

50-64 – *Moderate*: You are distracted by the anxiety, but are still aware of what's happening

65-84 – *High*: Difficult to concentrate, thinking about how to escape

85-100 – *Extreme*: The anxiety is overwhelming and you just want to escape from the situation

Planning Your Goals

Now you can start to turn the situations you avoid into goals that you'd like to achieve. For example, a situation that you avoid might be “Going to pubs”, which has a distress rating of 75. A goal for this might be “To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours”. When you are developing a goal, it helps to make them SMART:

Specific: It needs to be as clear (eg compare “To eat in public” with “To eat lunch in a local restaurant on my own.”)

Measurable: It needs to be easily assessed (eg compare “Being friendly” with “Staying for 2 hrs” - what does ‘friendly’ mean?)

Achievable: It needs to be possible and probable to achieve

Relevant: It needs to be important to you

Timebound: It needs to have an end date for completion

Building Steps Towards Your Goal

Now that you have a personal, realistic, achievable, measurable, and specific goal that you'd like to achieve, you can plan your “graded exposure” program. This involves breaking the goal down so that you can work step-by-step towards your major goal. Of course, goals with high distress (eg a rating of 80+) will need more steps than a medium distress goal (eg a rating of 40+). You can break your goal into smaller steps by changing WHO is there, WHAT you do, WHEN you do it, WHERE you do it, and HOW long you do it for. Follow the SMART criteria for developing each step. Here's an example.



| | |
|---|----------------|
| GOAL: To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours | DISTRESS 0-100 |
| | 80 |

| STEP | | DISTRESS 0-100 |
|------|--|----------------|
| 1 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 10min | 35 |
| 2 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 30min | 45 |
| 3 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weeknight</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 7pm to 8pm | 55 |
| 4 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), and stay for 30 minutes | 65 |
| 5 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm | 70 |
| 6 | Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (some of the friends don't know about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm | 80 |

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Climbing Steps Towards Your Goal

Once you have developed the steps that you can take towards your main goal, you can make an appointment with yourself to start on your first step. Here are a few tips for how you can progress through your situational exposure steps.

before the first step

- 1) **Coping with anxiety.** Before you start on a situational exposure exercise, it is useful to have developed ways of coping with the distress you might feel in the situation. Using well practised breathing techniques can help to reduce the physical response to anxiety. Reducing your general level of anxiety through muscle relaxation techniques can also help to prepare you for entering the situation.
- 2) **Challenging negative thoughts.** Another way to prepare yourself is to challenge negative thoughts that you might have about yourself or the situation. If you spend time working through these thoughts you can come up with some helpful ways of thinking about the situation.

These strategies are discussed in other information sheets in this series.

completing a step

- 1) **Expect some anxiety.** When you enter the situation – at any step - remember that you'll probably experience some anxiety or discomfort. That's why it's important to start small, and work your way up.
- 2) **Use your skills.** Just as used your coping skills to prepare for the situation, use them while you are in the situation. Use your breathing to reduce your physical anxiety response and challenge negative thoughts that you might have.
- 3) **Stay in the situation.** While it might be tempting to leave if you feel uncomfortable, try to stay in the situation until the anxiety goes down. In this way you can see that, as frightening as the feelings are, they are not dangerous, and they do subside.
- 4) **Stay involved.** 'Staying away' can happen in many different ways, such as sitting away from others, or avoiding eye contact. Stay involved in the situation by noticing what is happening and really experiencing the situation. Really taking part in these situations is the only way to make sure you get used to the anxiety.
- 5) **Stay sober.** Staying involved means being fully aware of what is happening. This means not taking alcohol or drugs to try to "mentally escape" the situation.



climbing the steps

- 1) **One step at a time.** Climbing a stepladder is not about taking one giant leap, it's about taking one small step at a time. You begin with the least difficult step and gradually work your way up the step ladder getting used to the anxiety you feel at each step. Your primary aim at each step is to complete that step and that step alone.
- 2) **Over and over again.** Do a step frequently and repeatedly, and try to do them in close succession to make sure you are comfortable with the situation before you move onto the next step. This might take 3 or 4 times.
- 3) **Use your skills.** Work through any unhelpful thoughts about the situation after you have completed each step, or repeated a step. Allow yourself to unwind with a relaxation session.
- 4) **Acknowledge the steps you've made.** When you are comfortable with a particular step, admit to your successes and acknowledge the steps that you've made so far.
- 5) **Stepbacks.** We all have our up and down days, and sometimes you might think you've taken a 'step-back' because the situational exposure exercise didn't go as well as you hoped. If you are having difficulties with a particular step then it might be useful to take a "step back" and work on the previous step again or design an "in between" step between the one you've completed and the difficult one. That's why doing a step over and over is so helpful. Remember – take it one step at a time.

use a diary to record your progress

A diary can help you to keep track of the steps you've completed, and how you can cope with any difficulties you've had. You could use the following columns

- **Situation:** Describe the step and the situation
- **Expected Distress:** Indicate the distress level you expected (0-100)
- **Actual Distress:** Indicate the level of distress you *actually* experienced
- **Outcome:** Indicate whether you completed the step and the skills you used that were helpful, OR, if you had difficulties, describe how you can prepare for the next time.

If you're having difficulties with situational exposure tasks, talk to a professional so that they can guide you through the process.