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.

### 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

### Example Goal

**GOAL**: To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours

**DISTRESS**: 80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>DISTRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Go to the local pub on a weekday afternoon (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 1 min</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Go to the local pub on a weekend night (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 30 min</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Go to the local pub on a weekend night (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 7 pm to 8 pm</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Go to the local pub on a weekend night (with a friend who knows about the problem), and stay for 30 minutes</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Go to the local pub on a weekend night (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 8 pm to 10 pm</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Go to the local pub on a weekend night (some of the friends don’t know about the problem), staying from 8 pm to 10 pm</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Situational exposure

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.

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.