

# Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

## Module 4

### **Behavioural Experiment Stepladders**

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## Introduction

In Module 3, we looked at how avoidance keeps anxiety going, and introduced behavioural experiments as a way to break out of the vicious cycle of anxiety and avoidance and test our social fears. In this module, we will introduce a way to order your behavioural experiments in a step-by-step way, so testing your fears feels more manageable.

## Taking it one step at a time

Conducting behavioural experiments to test your fears involves going outside of your comfort zone. Some people find it helps to do this one step at a time, rather than trying to do the hardest possible thing first. Sometimes, if you try to tackle your biggest fear straight away, it can end up being too overwhelming, or it may even leave you more anxious than when you started, or it may be so confronting that you continue to avoid.



Breaking things down and beginning with slightly easier experiments can help in finding a manageable way to get started, and then you can build from there. You can start with experiments that generate mild anxiety, progress to those that generate moderate anxiety, and then work your way up to those that generate high anxiety. One advantage of ordering things this way is that you can test your fears and build your coping skills and confidence as you go – by the time you get to the hardest steps, they may not be as anxiety-provoking as they once were.

## Behavioural experiment stepladders

A behavioural experiment stepladder is a tool to plan behavioural experiments in increasing order of difficulty. The following steps will help you develop your behavioural experiment stepladder:

1. **Identify an area for change.** What would you like to be different? In what area of your life are you having difficulties that you would most like to change?

Most people with social anxiety find that there is more than one area of their life they would like to change. Write down any ideas you have about areas of your life you would like to change on the lines below. Once you have written down your ideas, choose one area you would like to start with. You could choose the area that is most important to you, or the area it would be easiest to make changes in. Working on one goal at a time can help keep you focused, and can give you a greater sense of progress than if you work on lots of different goals as once.

### Areas I would like to change:

*e.g. Talking to colleagues at work; Being more independent (e.g. going to shops and appointments alone); meeting new people; joining a hobby group; going out on dates*

### The area I will start with first:

*e.g. Talking to colleagues at work*

2. **Identify your fears.** Now that you have identified an area for change, the next step is to identify your social fears relating to this area of your life. What are you worried may happen? What negative thoughts or images do you have relating to this situation? What do you predict will happen in these situations?

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Write down your answers on the lines below.

*e.g. At work I am worried that I will say the wrong thing. People will think I am stupid and they will be frustrated by me*

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3. **Design behavioural experiments to test your fears.** Now that you have identified the fears that you have about this situation, it is time to plan a range of experiments that will help you test your predictions (aim for up to 10 different experiments). What situations will you need to approach to test your negative predictions?

*e.g. To find out how my colleagues will respond to me, I will need to talk more at work. I could say something as I walk past someone in the corridor, I could speak to people in the lunch room, or I could speak up at a work meeting.*

Try to plan a range of behavioural experiments. You might like to initially plan some experiments that are less challenging, and build towards doing more difficult experiments over time.

There are a number of factors you can tweak to make a behavioural experiment more or less difficult. These could include:

- Who is there?
- How many people are there?
- How familiar/unfamiliar are the people?
- How familiar/unfamiliar is the place?
- What am I doing?
- When am I doing it?
- Where am I doing it?



As you consider these questions, you may be able to change aspects of the situation to make a task more or less challenging. For instance, you might feel more anxious if there are more people around. So speaking to someone one-on-one might feature around the bottom of your stepladder and speaking within a group situation might feature closer to the top. On the next two pages you will find examples of behavioural experiment stepladders.

## Behavioural experiment stepladder - example 1

Area for change: Share my ideas more at work

Negative predictions about these situations:

I will say the wrong thing. My colleagues will think I am stupid. They will roll their eyes and laugh about me with each other. They won't want to work with me and will get frustrated if they have to.

<b>GOAL:</b> To give a presentation at work	<b>ANXIETY</b> (?/10)
Give a presentation at the team meeting	10
Give a practice presentation to a few colleagues	9
Give a practice presentation to my family/friends	8
Attend a team meeting and say at least two things	7
Attend a team meeting and say at least one thing	6
Eat in the lunch room and make small talk with my colleagues	5
Reply to a group email and make my own suggestion	4
Reply to a group email and agree with what someone else wrote	3

## Behavioural experiment stepladder - example 2



Area for change: Expanding my social network

Negative predictions about these situations:

Others will think I am weird. They won't want to interact with me. When I try to talk to them they will make an excuse to leave. They will avoid me in future.

<b>GOAL:</b> Join the board games group at my local games shop	<b>ANXIETY</b> (?/10)
Invite someone from the board games group to go for coffee	10
Attend the board games group and participate	9
Contact the board games group organiser and sign up to go	7/8
Invite my neighbour over for coffee	6
Say hello to other people at the dog park and ask them a question	5
Say hello to my neighbour and ask at least one question	4
Say hello to my neighbour when we are both out the front	3



## Completing a Step on your stepladder

Now that you have prepared a behavioural experiment stepladder, you can make an appointment with yourself to take the first step. By setting a date, time, and place you are making a firm commitment to yourself to begin. When you are in the situation that you have planned, there are a few points to remember.

### 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 the stepladder helps you to start small and work your way up. This gives you the chance to adapt to that level of anxiety, so that you aren't overwhelmed by higher levels of distress. After all, the only way to get used to those feelings is by experiencing them.

### 2. Use your skills

You can use the thought challenging strategy from Module 2 to deal with any unhelpful thoughts that come up. Challenging your unhelpful thinking can help manage your anxiety to enable you to take the steps on your stepladder.

### 3. Stay in the situation

Some anxiety is expected, and it might be tempting to leave if you feel uncomfortable, but it is very important to stay in the situation until you have had a chance to follow through with your planned experiment. Otherwise, you will not be able to collect the information you need in order to test out your negative predictions. Staying in the situation can also give you the opportunity to learn that as frightening as the feelings are, they are not dangerous and they do subside. You might also learn that you are better able to cope with feeling anxious than you thought you were.

## Working through your stepladder

OK, so now that you have some tips on how to get through one step, how do you keep moving onwards and upwards? Here are some guidelines for how you can continue to work through each step to reach your goal.

### 1. One step at a time

Working through your behavioural experiment stepladder is about taking one small step at a time. You begin with a more manageable step and gradually work your way up to more challenging steps.



### 2. Over and over again

It can be helpful to repeat experiments in close succession to consolidate your learnings before you move onto the next step. If you only enter a situation once, you might convince yourself that it was luck. Repeating experiments helps to build up the evidence for when you are disputing any unhelpful thoughts, and will help you feel more convinced by the evidence you are gathering.

### 3. Use your skills

That's right – use your skills again! Work through any unhelpful thoughts about the situation after you have completed each step, or repeated a step. Remind yourself of what you have learned from each experiment to help reinforce new information and break old unhelpful thinking patterns.

## 4. Acknowledge the progress you are making

When you have completed a particular step, make sure to give yourself credit for your success. This can be hard work, and it helps to remind yourself of the progress you are making rather than just focusing on the eventual goal at the top of your stepladder. Acknowledging your progress can be encouraging and motivating.



## 5. Setbacks

We all have our good and bad days, and sometimes behavioural experiments might not go as well as you hoped. If a situation hasn't gone as well as you hoped or you've taken a step backwards, there are a number of things you can do.

- Use your thought challenging record as a way of challenging unhelpful thoughts that arise about the situation.
- Set a time and date to try the step again (remember – over and over).
- If you have tried it a few times and you still find it distressing, you may find it useful to create an 'in-between' step, by planning another step that is slightly less distressing and has a slightly lower anxiety rating. You might think of this as a 'bridging step' in the same way that some people might take a 'bridging course' to get them ready for the next step. You might also want to consider whether there are some additional negative predictions causing the distress that still haven't been tested. Do these predictions require a different behavioural experiment? If so, set one up and go for it!
- You may find it helpful to go back and repeat the previous step. Sometimes, if it has been a while since you've completed a behavioural experiment, you may find it helpful to repeat it to build your confidence in what you have learned. This can help you feel ready for the next step. You might think of these as 'refreshers' in the same way that people take 'refresher courses' before they go on to the next step.



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## Module Summary

- Sometimes approaching feared situations can be overwhelming. To assist with this, you can use behavioural experiment stepladders to confront your fears in a step-by-step way.
- You can make each step easier or harder by adjusting the 'Who', 'What', 'When', 'Where' and 'How' components of each step.
- Once you develop your behavioural experiment stepladder, make an appointment with yourself to take the first step. Making a written commitment about the day, time and place to do something increases the likelihood of following through.
- Repetition is important. Repeating the same behavioural experiment multiple times can help reinforce new learnings, and to build confidence before taking the next step. Repeating experiments in close succession is more effective than if we leave a long time between each behavioural experiment.
- Setbacks are normal. If something doesn't go to plan, you can use your skills to manage it and get back on track.

### Coming Up...

In the next module we will discuss safety behaviours, which are subtle avoidance behaviours that can keep social anxiety going. We will show how you can apply behavioural experiments to start dropping safety behaviours.



## About the Modules

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### Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

McEvoy, P. & Saulsman, L. (2017). *Imagery-Based Cognitive Behaviour Group Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder (IB-CBGT)*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Examples of this are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Hyett, M. P., Bank, S. R., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Johnson, A. R., Kyron, M. J., Saulsman, L. M., Moulds, M. L., Grisham, J. R., Holmes, E. A., Moscovitch, D. A., Lipp, O. V. Campbell, B. N. C., & Rapee, R. M. (in press). Imagery-enhanced versus verbally-based group cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *Psychological Medicine*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003001>

Rapee, R. M., Gaston, J. E., & Abbott, M. J. (2009). Testing the efficacy of theoretically derived improvements in the treatment of social phobia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77, 317– 327.

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

McEvoy, P. M., Saulsman, L. M., & Rapee, R. M. (2018). *Imagery-enhanced CBT for social anxiety disorder*. Guilford Press.

Hackmann, A., Bennett-Levy, J., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds., 2011). *Oxford Guide to Imagery in Cognitive Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kemp, N., Thompson, A., Gaston, J., & Rapee, R. (2003). Cognitive behavioural therapy-enhanced for social anxiety disorder: group treatment program. Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University.

Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: what is old is new again. Invited review for *Australian Psychologist*, 54, 237-244. doi: 10.1111/ap.12406.

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