

Graded Exposure

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Graded Exposure is an evidence based intervention for the treatment of anxiety and phobias.

This workbook can be used either alone or with the support of your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner.

How to use this workbook.

Graded Exposure has three steps. It is important to work through one step at a time, only move on to the next step of Graded Exposure once you are comfortable with using the previous step. It is key to follow all three steps of Graded Exposure in sequence.

It can take some time for an intervention to become effective and to show improvement. It is important to allow enough time for the intervention to be effective.

Helpful Resources;

Exposure and Habituation cedar.exeter.ac.uk

Facing Your Fears www.anxietybc.com

An Introduction to Coping with Anxiety, by Brosnan and Hogan www.cpft.nhs.uk
www.overcoming.co.uk

Coping with Anxiety, Brosnan *et al* www.cpft.nhs.uk

www.talkplus.org.uk

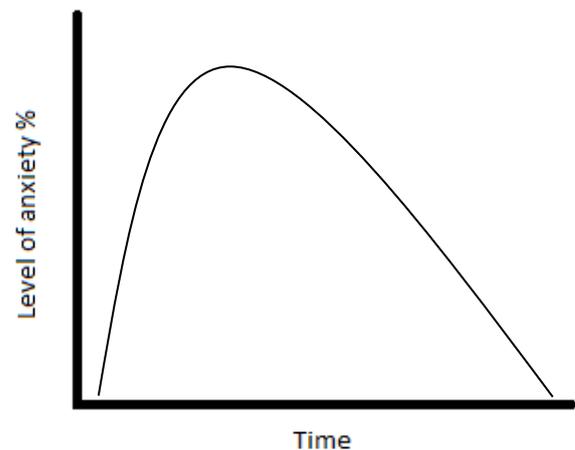
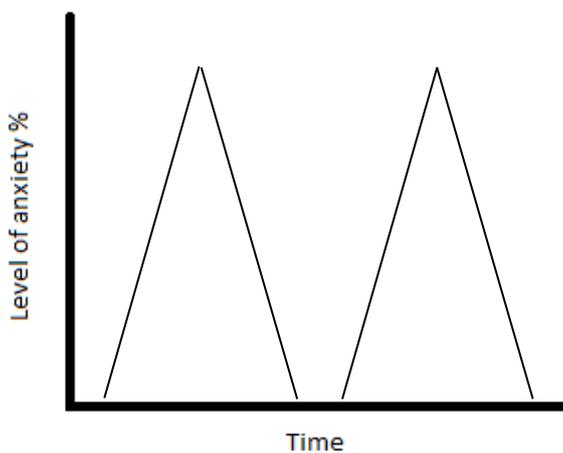
Graded Exposure



Tackling Avoidance in Feared Situations

Graded Exposure is an evidence based treatment used to tackle avoidance of feared situations, activities or objects due to anxiety. It works through a process called *habituation*, a gradual reduction in the physical sensations of anxiety. This is achieved through identifying feared situations or objects and gradually exposing ourselves to them whilst following four conditions.

When we fear certain situations, objects or activities, we either avoid or leave the situation in order to reduce our anxiety. Although this may be helpful in reducing our distress in the short term, avoidance can help to maintain this pattern of fear and anxiety. Therefore each time we go into a feared situation we experience the same high level of anxiety time after time.



Habituation

As shown in the above left graph, when we leave a situation our anxiety immediately reduces, however the next time we enter that situation our anxiety becomes just as high. As in the past we have found relief in leaving, this is what we often continue to do to reduce the distress we experience. The anxiety we experience is part of the '*fight or flight*' response, a biological system to prepare us to respond to frightening or dangerous situations. However physiologically we cannot remain at this high level of anxiety, so by exposing ourselves to the situation, and remaining in it, our anxiety naturally reduces, this is the process of *habituation*.

Graded exposure works by gradually exposing ourselves to the feared situation, beginning only with situations that we feel we are able to tolerate, this can be seen in the graph on the right. This allows the process of habituation to occur in order to reduce our fear and reduce our anxiety response in the long term.

STEP ONE

Identifying anxiety-provoking situations



The first step of Graded Exposure is to identify all the activities that cause you anxiety and are therefore either avoiding, leaving or distracting yourself. It may be that you have a number of different feared situations, objects or activities, it is then important to separate these fears into different lists and select one specific fear to tackle at a time.

Avoiding or leaving a situation are just two things we might do to make ourselves feel safer and to reduce our anxiety. There are often more subtle ways in which we avoid fully experiencing anxiety in situations. These include distraction and safety behaviours, see the box below for examples, to help identify the subtle behaviours we use to minimise distress. Engaging in distraction and safety behaviours also maintain our fear of the situation in the long term, much as avoiding or leaving it does. Therefore it is important to include these in our list, for example going shopping with a friend instead of alone so we feel safer and experience less anxiety.

Be specific

Whilst making the list of anxiety provoking situations, include when we distract ourselves, it is important to be specific. Include in the list what, where, when and with whom each situation occurs. It may be that there are a number of similar situations that cause anxiety, for example going shopping with a friend at 8am or going shopping with a friend at 4pm, due to the fact that these small differences cause different levels of anxiety.

Common distraction techniques and safety behaviours.

Listening to music	Sitting next to your partner
Taking a friend	Alcohol
Carrying a bottle of water	Being near the exit
Talking on the phone	Planning your route beforehand
Routine and checklists	Medication

To complete Step 1 use *Worksheet 1*.

Fill in the worksheet with activities that provoke anxiety.

STEP TWO

Developing a hierarchy



Having identified a specific fear to work on, the second step of Graded Exposure is to rank the situations identified in *Worksheet 1* in order of the level of anxiety you experience. Ranking activities from least anxiety-provoking, to most anxiety-provoking means that Graded Exposure can be carried out gradually, without experiencing levels of anxiety that are overwhelming.

Activities are ranked from those that would provoke the highest level of anxiety to those that provoke less intense feelings. It is useful to think about the situation that would be easiest to remain in first and the situation that would be the most difficult, and then fill in situations in between. This process can seem very daunting or overwhelming at first therefore this stage of developing a hierarchy is very important. Sometimes it can be difficult to think of what would be more or less anxiety-provoking, therefore it is useful to;

Rate predicted anxiety levels

It can be helpful to mark on Worksheet 1 next to each situation how much anxiety it would provoke from 0-100%. This will then make it easier to place the situations or activities in a hierarchy, from the lowest to the highest percentage.

Break it down

Sometimes it is difficult to come up with several different variations of the same situation, especially as the feelings it causes are so overwhelming. By thinking of what, where, when and with whom each situation occurs we can then break down the situations into many variations that cause different levels of anxiety. The box below gives some examples of this, also see example sheets at the back.

Breaking down your fears.

- Different times of the day
- With safety behaviours and without
- Looking at a photograph
- Watching a video
- Larger or smaller locations
- Alone or with a friend

To complete Step 2 use *Worksheet 2*.

Rank the activities in order of how much anxiety they provoke.

STEP THREE

Planning exposures



The third step of Graded Exposure is to begin exposing yourself to feared situations, starting with the least anxiety-provoking. When planning exposures it is important to make a specific plan to expose yourself based on the four conditions of Graded Exposure. These conditions are Graded, Prolonged, Without Distraction and Repeated.

When planning exposure in the diary be specific about what, where, when and with whom you will carry out the exposure. Rate your level of anxiety, from 0-100% before, during and after each exposure to monitor reductions in your anxiety levels. There is a space to make any comments or record any reactions during each repeated exposure.

Graded

Facing fears can be a very difficult and overwhelming challenge, therefore it is important to start by exposing yourself to a situation which causes a level of anxiety but is not too much. This is achieved by using the hierarchy developed in Step 2. In this way you can move up the hierarchy only when you feel confident enough to do so.

Prolonged

It is important that we remain in the feared situation for long enough until anxiety naturally reduces through the process of *habituation*. This process can take anywhere from 5 minutes to 2 hours. It can be difficult to stay in the situation for this length of time, however if you leave before beginning to feel a reduction in anxiety you will continue to avoid the situations, and use this unhelpful strategy in the future.

Without Distraction

Engaging in safety behaviours or distraction whilst in an anxiety-provoking situation means we do not fully experience the symptoms of anxiety. *Habituation* cannot occur if we are reducing our anxiety in other ways, therefore it is important to plan your exposure to ensure you are not distracted in any way. It may be that to start with it is too anxiety-provoking not to use any safety behaviours that you might have been using for a long time. In this case you can begin exposing yourself with these behaviours, and then gradually reducing them.

Repeated

In order for *habituation* in a specific situation to occur we need to repeatedly expose ourselves. It is recommended that an exposure to one situation is repeated 4-5 times in one week. This may be difficult to achieve if the situations you are exposing yourself to are expensive, rare or involve others. In these cases it is important to be creative, e.g. watch a video, and try to carry out as many exposures as possible.

To complete Step 3 use *Worksheet 3*.

Plan in your weekly exposures and rate your levels of anxiety.

WORKSHEET THREE

Planning exposure



	Date & Time	Duration	Exposure	Anxiety Rating			Comments
				Before	During	After	
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							



EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET TWO

Developing a hierarchy

Fear of crowded places



<i>Most anxiety-provoking</i>	<i>% Rating</i>
London Trafalgar Square	100%
ASDA alone	80%
ASDA with my partner	75%
Farnborough shopping centre	70%
Cinema	60%
Tesco Express	55%
Local Café at a busy time (Saturday morning)	50%
Local Café at a less busy time	40%
Corner shop	35%
<i>Least anxiety-provoking</i>	

EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET THREE

Planning exposure



	Date & Time	Duration	Exposure	Anxiety Rating			Comments
				Before	During	After	
1	Wednesday 3pm	45 minutes	ASDA	60%	75%	40%	This was a bit scarier than I thought - quite hard
2	Friday 11am	55 minutes	ASDA	55%	60%	30%	Better than the last time
3	Saturday 10am	30 minutes	ASDA	50%	65%	90%	Got very busy in the shop and somebody hit me with their trolley so I left- wish I hadn't
4	Sunday 2pm	65 minutes	ASDA	55%	50%	30%	I'm starting to feel the anxiety really going down now
5	Tuesday 4pm	70 minutes	ASDA	40%	30%	15%	Found it really easy- got a coffee in the cafe after my shopping

