

## GRADUAL EXPOSURE TO FEAR

Fears that are so strong that they control our behavior need to be faced and overcome. This exercise will help you do just that: Identify what your fear is; describe how it affects you; develop a plan to face it systematically; and, finally, actually take steps to face your fear and win.

### I. IDENTIFY FEAR

It is important to clearly identify what you fear and how it affects you emotionally (for example, feel nervous and tense), behaviorally (such as avoid contact and/or don't talk about the feared stimulus), and physically (for instance, heart pounds, sweaty forehead and palms, stomachache, nausea). Describe what the feared object or situation is, and then tell how it affects you.

#### Feared Object or Situation

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#### Reaction to Feared Object or Situation

Emotional reaction: \_\_\_\_\_

Behavioral reaction: \_\_\_\_\_

Physical reaction: \_\_\_\_\_

To overcome a fear, it must be faced in a gradual but systematic fashion. We call it *exposure*. When you practice exposure in the proper way, fear steadily diminishes until it does not control your behavior or affect you physically. The key to the process is to develop a plan for gradually increasing exposure to the feared object or situation. Once the plan is developed, you then expose yourself one step at a time to the feared object or situation. You do not take the next step in the gradual exposure plan until you are quite comfortable with the current level of exposure.

For example, say you have a fear of going into crowded shopping malls. You could design a plan as follows:

- **Step 1.** Drive to shopping mall with support person (i.e., parent or friend) and spend 2 to 3 minutes in parking lot.
- **Step 2.** Walk up to entrance of store or mall and walk around store or mall for 5 to 10 minutes with support person.
- **Step 3.** Repeat steps 1 and 2 alone.
- **Step 4.** Enter shopping mall for 1 to 2 minutes with support person and then exit.

- **Step 5.** Enter shopping mall for 5 to 10 minutes with support person and then exit.
- **Step 6.** Walk length of mall once with support person.
- **Step 7.** Enter store in mall with support person and buy one item.
- **Step 8.** Enter store(s) in mall with support person and buy several items.
- **Step 9.** Repeat steps 7 and 8 with support person waiting outside.
- **Step 10.** Go to mall by yourself. Buy one item the first time, and gradually increase the number of items bought or time spent in mall.

Each next step is taken only after the fear is low or gone in the current step.

## II. CREATE HIERARCHY

Now create a gradual exposure program to overcome your feared object or situation. The steps can increase the time you spend with the feared object or situation, increase your closeness to it, increase the size of the object, or a combination of these things. Use as many steps as you need. Your therapist is available to help you construct this plan, if necessary.

- Step 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 5. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 6. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 7. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 8. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 9. \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 10. \_\_\_\_\_

## III. FACE YOUR FEAR

Now it's time for a gradual but steady exposure to your feared object or situation. Stay relaxed. Your therapist may teach you some deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and positive self-talk techniques that you can use to keep yourself relaxed. For each step you take, rate your degree of fear on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing extreme panic and fear. The rating of 1 represents total calm, complete confidence, peace of mind, looseness, and relaxed feeling. Use the following scale to help rate your anxiety or fear:

- 0 Total relaxation: calm, complete confidence
- 1 Slight anxiety: fleeting moment of anxiety, feeling slightly anxious
- 2 Mild anxiety: mild muscle tension, mild nervousness
- 3 Moderate anxiety: anxious and uncomfortable, heart starting to beat faster, sweaty palms

- 4 High anxiety: heart pounding, shaking or trembling, muscles tense
- 5 Mild panic attack: heart pounding, breathing is short and shallow, fear of losing control
- 6 Moderate panic attack: heart pounding, irregular breathing, fear of losing control or thoughts of going crazy
- 7-10 Strong or extreme panic attack: very strong panic reaction, intense fear, many bodily symptoms of panic

When your rating is reduced to 2 to 3 or lower on a consistent basis for the exposure to a particular step, then it's time to consider moving on to the next step.

<b>Step in Hierarchy</b>	<b>Ratings for Exposures</b>
Step 1. _____	_____
Step 2. _____	_____
Step 3. _____	_____
Step 4. _____	_____
Step 5. _____	_____
Step 6. _____	_____
Step 7. _____	_____
Step 8. _____	_____
Step 9. _____	_____
Step 10. _____	_____