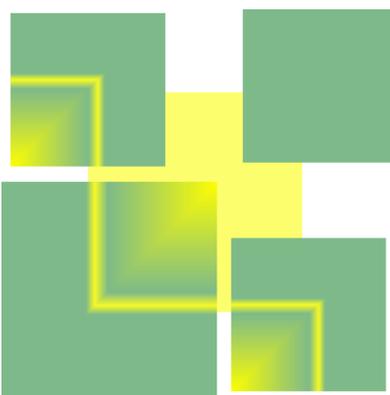




Graded Exposure



Graded Exposure

When to use this workbook

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

This workbook can be used either alone as a self help resource or with the support of a 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: <https://www.talkplus.org.uk/graded-exposure-video-module>

Exposure and Habituation <https://talkchanges.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Exposure-Habituation.pdf>

Facing Your Fears <https://www.anxietycanada.com/strategies-and-techniques/facing-fears/>
Anxiety UK <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

Evidence Base for Graded Exposure:

NHS Phobias <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/treatment/>

NHS Agoraphobia <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/treatment/>

NICE Guidance <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg123/chapter/1-Guidance#steps-2-and-3-treatment-and-referral-for-treatment>

Jo's Story

Jo is 32, and has struggled with a fear of driving that has developed in the last few months following a period of not driving the car.

They said “I never used to be scared of driving, I used to drive everywhere, an hour to work, in the countryside and on motorways! But now even the thought of getting in a car makes my heart race. I feel sweaty, shaky and even get light headed. It is having a huge impact on my life.”

Jo began avoiding driving completely, they opted to work from home, asked friends to pick them up and wouldn't go anywhere that involved driving. This meant that Jo even became fearful of being a passenger in someone else's car.

Jo knew that this couldn't carry on, so Jo googled “ways to overcome driving phobia” and found out about graded exposure. When looking on the NHS website, Jo saw that graded exposure could be done in a type of therapy called CBT. Jo looked at their local area and found TalkPlus provided this.

“When I referred to TalkPlus, I really wanted a quick fix but soon learnt that graded exposure, was going to take hard work and lots of practice.”

Jo worked with a psychological wellbeing-practitioner in 30 minute sessions of guided self-help on driving phobia. They used the vicious cycle to work out what was maintaining Jo's problem. It seemed that because Jo was avoiding, they were never allowing the anxiety to lessen therefore each time they got in a car they felt just as scared as before.

Jo set goals for treatment to be able to drive to and from work, twice a week and began with step one of graded exposure by identifying “anxiety provoking situations”, after this they were able to rank them in a hierarchy from least feared to most feared.

They could then begin planning their first exposure, keeping in mind the four conditions to successfully complete graded exposure. They found the first activities fairly straight forward and noticed the anxiety began to drop as they stayed in the anxiety provoking situation.

However, Jo decided to skip some activities on the ladder and jump to a more feared activity without repeating previous exposures. Jo found this flooded them with fight or flight anxiety symptoms which knocked their confidence. Despite this Jo returned to the less feared activities, and continued to repeat them in a graded manner without distraction making them prolonged enough to habituate.

Jo completed all 6 sessions of graded exposure and now feels comfortable driving to and from work again.

“Using graded exposure, I was able to get my independence back! Although I still have some anxiety around driving, I know that I can continue to use graded exposure to make myself feel more comfortable and achieve my goals.”

You can find Jo's example sheets before each blank template

What is Graded Exposure?

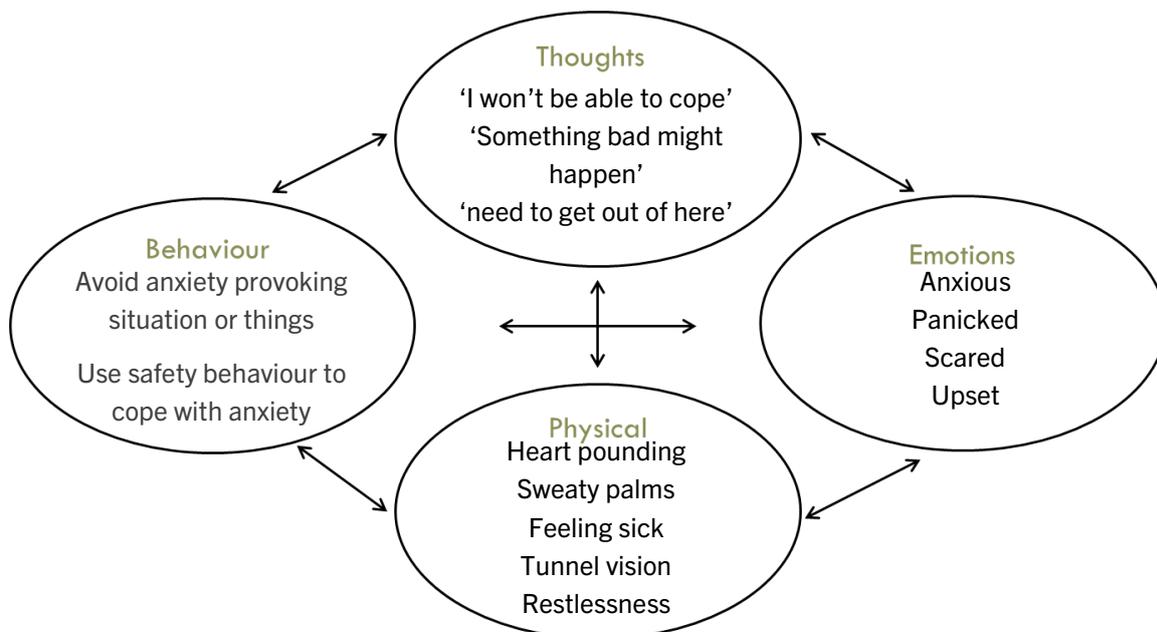
The CBT or vicious cycle below gives an example of some worries and how this can be maintained.

What is anxiety?

We can feel anxiety in different ways, it can be an emotion, or we can experience feelings of anxiety in our bodies. This is the fight/fight/freeze reflex which serves to protect us when we are threatened with dangerous situations. Adrenaline is pumped into our body to help prepare us and blood is directed to the large muscle groups ready to fight or run away.

This can cause symptoms like the physical ones listed below.

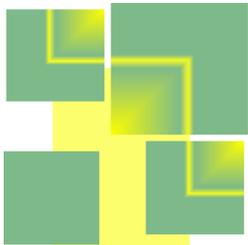
The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety and Avoidance



How does avoidance affect Anxiety?

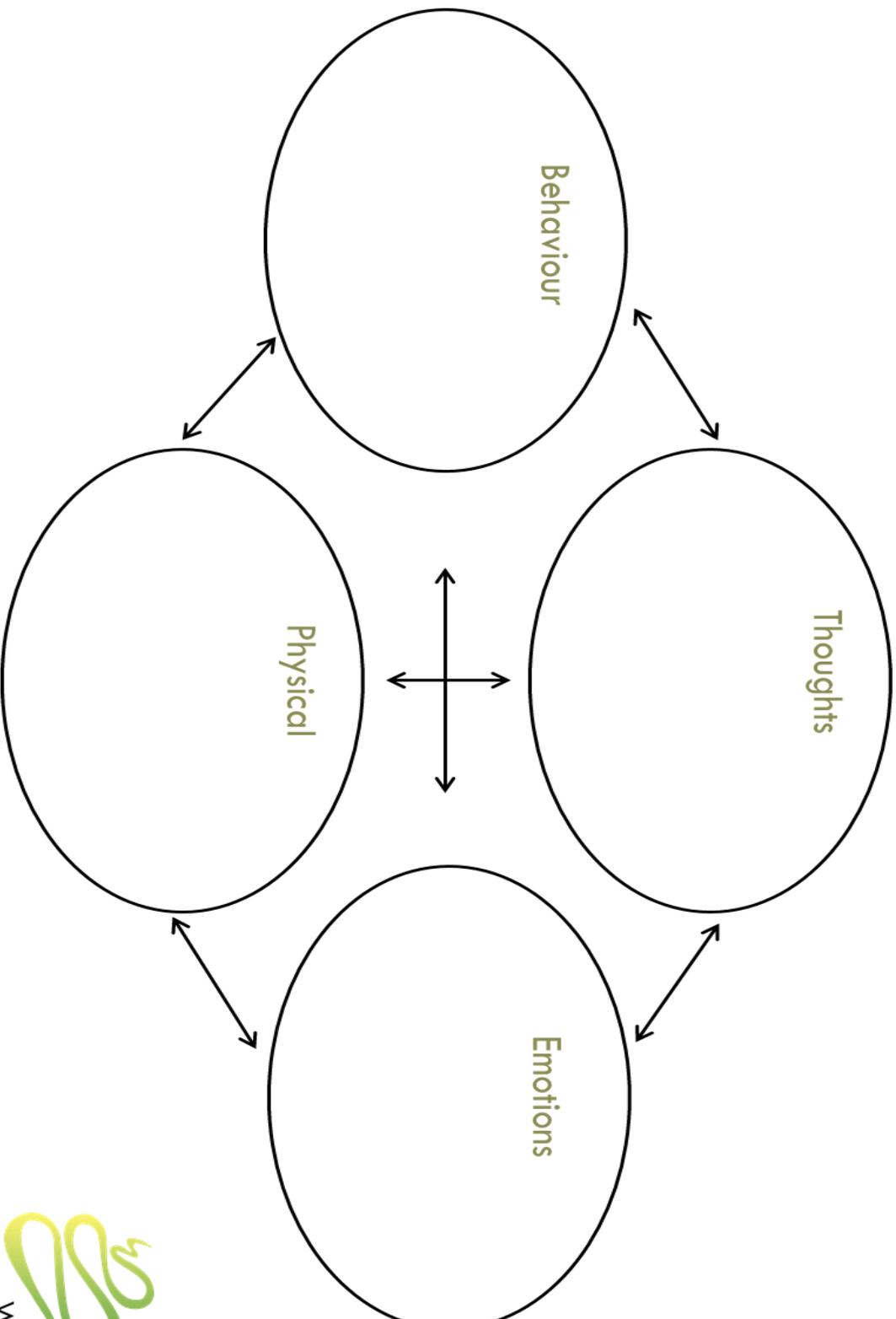
When we fear certain situations, objects or activities, we either avoid or leave the situation or use safety behaviours in order to reduce our anxiety.

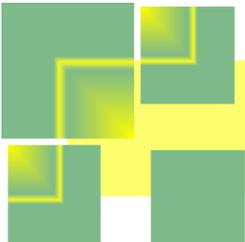
Although this may be helpful in reducing our distress in the short term, avoidance can help to maintain this pattern of fear and anxiety as shown above. Therefore each time we go into a feared situation we experience the same high level of anxiety time after time, by experiencing physical symptoms and the anxious emotions as well as unhelpful thoughts around the situation.



What does your vicious cycle look like?

Write down anxious thoughts that you have experienced recently in the box and then see how that made you feel emotionally, how it changed what you did or didn't do (your behaviour) and also what you felt in your body like anxiety symptoms.





Setting Goals

Why set goals?

Goal setting is an evidence based way of helping ourselves to decide on things you would like to achieve and what you will do to get there as well as work toward them.

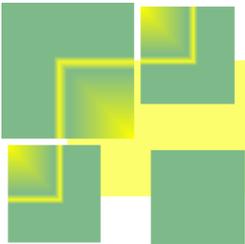
This helps us to stay focused on achieving things that matter most to us.

Goals should be:

- ⇒ Focused on short term objectives to begin with
- ⇒ Limited to no more than 3 goals
- ⇒ Positive in nature

You can use SMART to help you consider your goals:

Specific	Try and be specific with a time, date or anything you'll need to achieve the goal
Measurable	Goals should be able to be measured on a scale
Achievable	Goals should not 'set you up to fail' and should be feel within reach
Relevant	Goals should be relevant to your life or current problem
Time specific	Set a specific time or deadline to achieve your goal



Setting Goals

Have a go at creating your own goals and rating how much you have achieved your goal so far:

0	2	4	6	8	10
= Not achieved this goal at all	= slightly achieved this goal	= somewhat achieved this goal	= markedly achieved this goal	= mostly achieved this goal	= completely achieved this goal

Goal 1	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10
Goal 2	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10
Goal 3	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10

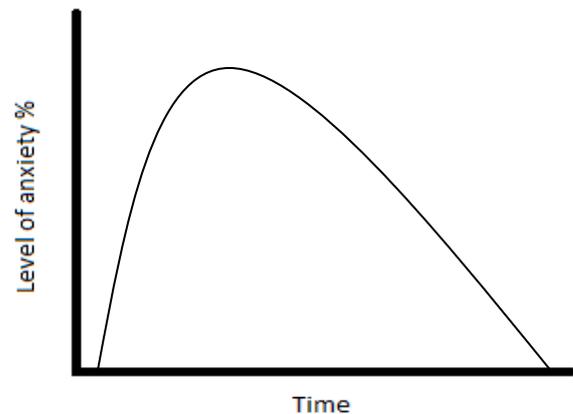
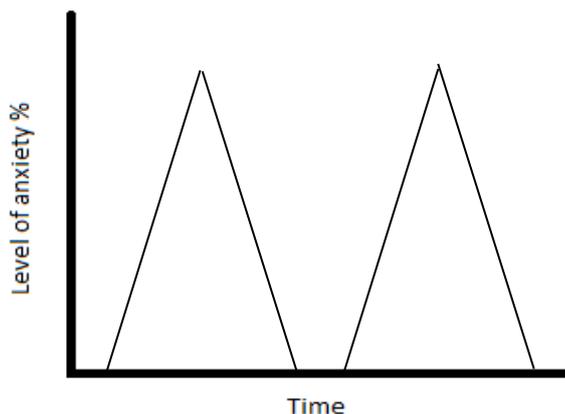
Graded Exposure

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.

Habituation

As shown in the 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 so that you are either avoiding them, leaving them or distracting yourself to try and cope. 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 on the next page below for examples, to help identify the subtle behaviours we use to minimise distress.
- Engaging in distraction and safety behaviours also maintains 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, including 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.

Step One (continued)

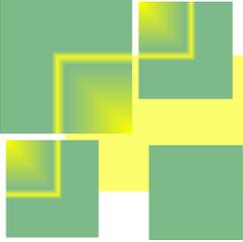
Identifying safety behaviours

Common distraction techniques and safety behaviours	
Listening to Music	Taking a friend or family member or partner
Wearing head/ear phones	Carrying a bottle of water
Talking on the phone	Staying near an exit
Drinking Alcohol	Sitting/Staying next to someone you know
Planning your route before hand	Overplanning before events
Carrying Anxiety medication	Having to do certain routines or follow plans

Try writing some of the safety behaviours you do below:	

To complete Step 1 use *Worksheet 1* on page 12.

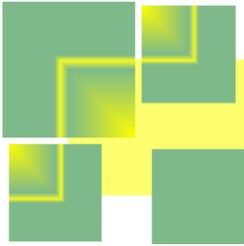
Fill in the worksheet with activities that provoke your anxiety.



JO'S EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET ONE

Be Specific: What? When? Where? Who?

Anxiety-Provoking Situations
• Sitting in the car
• Driving anywhere round the local area
• Parking the car in a public carpark
• Driving to unknow places or new towns
• Being in a situation where I could have a car crash
• Sitting in someone else's car
• Driving with someone else in case I crash
• Driving down windy country lanes
• Driving on the motorway because it's fast
• Someone driving close behind me



WORKSHEET ONE: Identifying anxiety-provoking situations

Be Specific: What? When? Where? Who?

Anxiety-Provoking Situations
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•

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 the least intense anxiety. 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.



Step Two (continued)

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

What

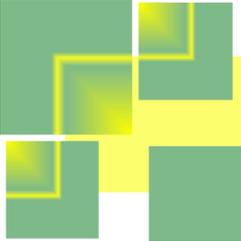
When

Where

Who

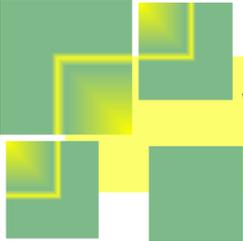
To complete Step 2 use *Worksheet 2* on page 16.

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



JO'S EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET TWO

Most anxiety-provoking	% Rating
Drive on the motorway at rush hour	100%
Drive on the motorway in light traffic	90%
Drive on the dual carriage way	80%
Drive on a country road	70%
Drive to a new place in heavier traffic	60%
Drive to a new place in light traffic	50%
Drive around the local neighbourhood for 30 mins	40%
Drive to around the local neighbour hood for 15	30%
Pull out of the driveway and drive a lap of the road	20%
Sit in the car with the ignition on	10%
Least anxiety-provoking	



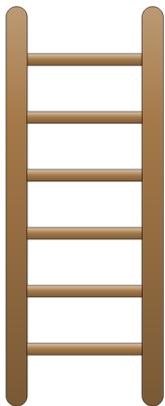
WORKSHEET TWO: Developing a hierarchy

Most anxiety-provoking	% Rating
Least anxiety-provoking	

Step Three

Planning exposures

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



1. Graded

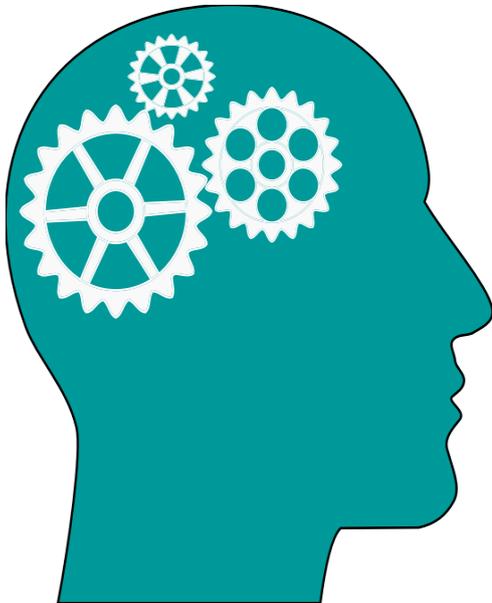
Facing fears can be a very difficult and overwhelming challenge, therefore it is important to start by exposing yourself to a situation which causes some level of anxiety but is not too much. This is achieved by using the hierarchy developed in Step 2. In this way you can move up the hierarchy only when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

2. 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.



Step Three (continued)

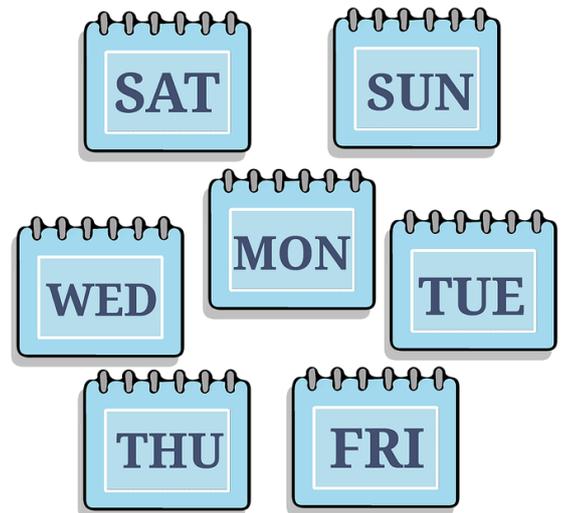


3. Without Distraction

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.

4. Repeated

In order for *habituation* to occur in a specific situation 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** on page 20.

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.

JO'S EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET THREE

	Date & Time	Duration	Exposure	Anxiety Rating			Comments
				Before	During	After	
1	Saturday 2pm	30 minutes	Driving round the local neighbourhood	60%	75%	40%	It was hard to get back to driving locally, but after I felt quite good about myself
2	Sunday 9.15am	25 minutes	Drive round the local neighbourhood	55%	65%	80%	I felt very anxious during this drive and I felt very nervous I might have a crash
3	Tuesday 4.15pm	40 minutes	Drive round the local neighbourhood	50%	55%	40%	I was still nervous from Sunday's drive but it went better than expected
4	Wednesday 3pm	55 minutes	Drive to new town	55%	50%	30%	I'm was very scared about driving somewhere unknown but it went quite well
5	Friday 12.30pm	60 minutes	Drive to another new town	40%	30%	15%	Found it really easy after yesterdays drive, even drove a bit longer than before

0%

25%

50%

75%

100%

No Anxiety

Mild Anxiety

Moderate Anxiety

Severe Anxiety

Panic

WORKSHEET THREE: Planning Exposure

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

0%

No Anxiety

25%

Mild Anxiety

50%

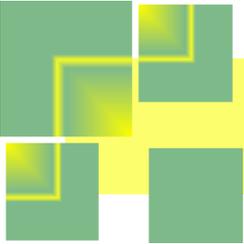
Moderate Anxiety

75%

Severe Anxiety

100%

Panic



Maintaining Progress

What techniques have been most helpful?

What are my early warning signs?

Are there any future obstacles coming up?

How can I prepare for these?

What are my future goals?

(see next page for a goal sheet)

Setting Future Goals

Have a go at creating your own goals to continue your progress and rate how much you have achieved your goal so far:

0	2	4	6	8	10
= Not achieved this goal at all	= slightly achieved this goal	= somewhat achieved this goal	= markedly achieved this goal	= mostly achieved this goal	= completely achieved this goal

Goal 1	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10
Goal 2	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10
Goal 3	Write your goal here:	Goal rating: /10



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