

# Facing Fears: Building an Exposure Hierarchy

Avoidance keeps anxiety alive — the less we do something, the scarier it tends to feel. Gradually and deliberately approaching what we avoid, in a planned order rather than all at once, is one of the most well-supported ways to change that.

**How to use this:** List situations you avoid or find distressing, from mildest to most difficult. Rate each 0–100 for how much distress it brings up right now. Start practising from the easier end — a step that feels manageable but still slightly uncomfortable is the right place to begin.

## Your hierarchy

| Situation | Distress (0–100) | Date practised |
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## Before you start a step

Plan to stay with the situation until distress has genuinely begun to settle, rather than leaving the moment it peaks — leaving at the peak is what teaches the nervous system that escape is what brought relief, which keeps the fear going. Expect distress to rise before it falls; that rise is the process working, not a sign to stop.

## Readiness check-in

Before moving to the next step up, it can help to ask honestly: has the current step stopped feeling quite so distressing when I do it? There's no fixed number of repetitions — some steps settle after two or three attempts, others take longer, and that's not a sign anything is wrong.

*Grounded in graded exposure principles as used in CBT for anxiety disorders and PTSD (e.g. Foa & Kozak; Foa, Hembree & Rothbaum's Prolonged Exposure protocol).*