Understanding agoraphobia

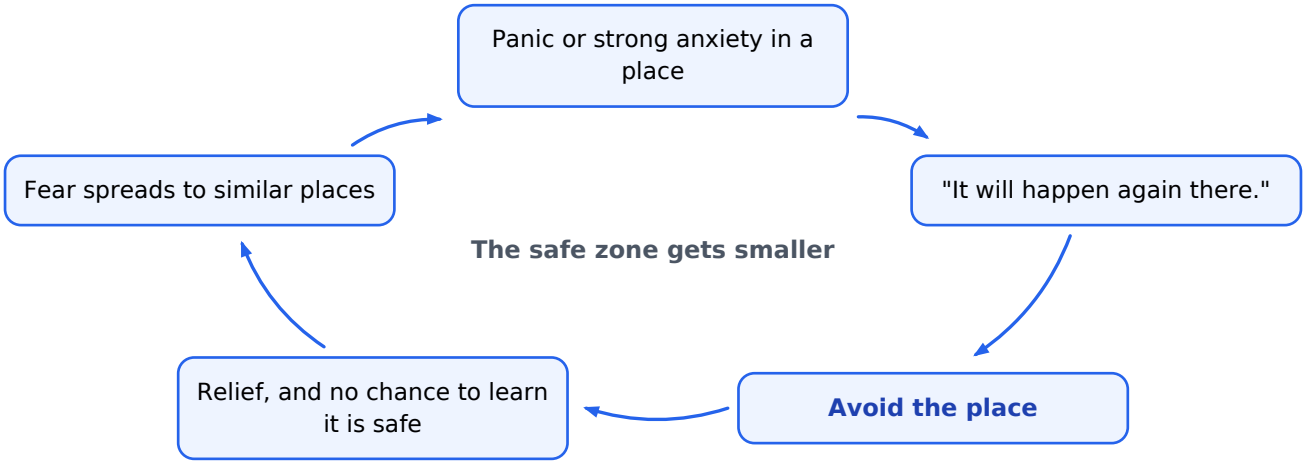
Fear and avoidance of places that would be hard to leave if you panicked.

Agoraphobia is not simply a fear of open spaces. It is a fear of being somewhere that would be hard to leave, or where help might not come, if you panicked or felt unwell. To stay safe, people start to avoid.

Commonly avoided

- [ ] Public transport
- [ ] Shops, supermarkets, queues
- [ ] Crowds, cinemas, restaurants
- [ ] Driving, motorways, bridges, tunnels
- [ ] Open spaces, car parks
- [ ] Being far from home
- [ ] Being at home alone
- [ ] Lifts and other enclosed spaces

How it grows



Some people can still do things with a trusted companion, with a "lucky" object, or at quiet times. These are safety behaviours. They help in the short term and keep the fear in place.

How it is treated

Agoraphobia is treated by going back, step by step, into the places you have been avoiding and staying long enough to learn what really happens. We build a ladder together. You set the pace.

Part of this work can happen outside the therapy room. If it would help, and once we have a good foundation, we can do some sessions out in the places that are hard for you.

The aim
To be able to go where you want, whether or not you feel anxious. Feeling no anxiety is not the target.

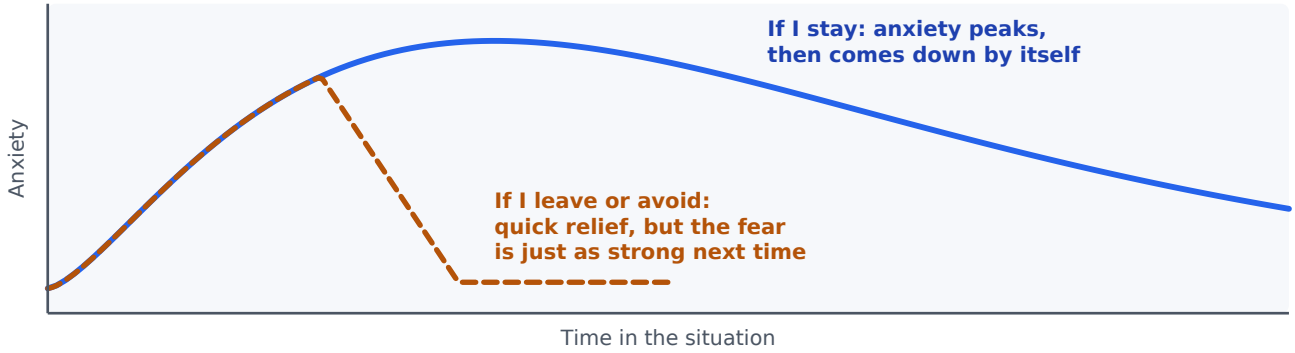
My notes and questions

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Avoidance: why it keeps anxiety going

How avoiding something brings relief now and more anxiety later.

Getting away from something frightening is a natural thing to do, and the relief is immediate. That is why avoidance is easy to fall into. Over time it makes anxiety worse.



What avoidance teaches your brain

- "That was dangerous, and I only just got away." The alarm is confirmed.
- "I cannot cope with that." Confidence shrinks a little each time.
- "Avoiding works." So next time the urge to avoid is stronger, and it spreads to more situations.

What staying teaches your brain

- Anxiety rises, peaks and comes down by itself, even if you do nothing to make it stop.
- The thing you feared usually does not happen, or you cope with it better than you expected.
- Each time you stay, the next time is a little easier.

Avoidance is not always obvious

- [ ] Putting things off, or making excuses
- [ ] Only doing something with a "safe" person
- [ ] Keeping busy so there is no time to think
- [ ] Drinking or scrolling to take the edge off
- [ ] Leaving early, or arriving late
- [ ] Going, but not really taking part

Where to start

Start with something that feels manageable but not easy, and stay with it long enough for the anxiety to begin to drop. The biggest fears can wait until later.

My notes and questions

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Facing fears: how exposure works

Why facing a fear in planned steps reduces it, and how to do it well.

Avoiding something frightening teaches your brain that it really is dangerous. Exposure is the opposite: you approach what you fear, deliberately and gradually, and stay long enough to find out what actually happens.

What happens when you stay



Anxiety cannot stay at its peak. If you stay put and do not use safety behaviours, it levels off and begins to fall by itself. Even when it stays high for a while, you learn something just as valuable: that you can feel anxious and still cope.

What happens when you repeat it



Each practice starts a little lower and settles a little faster. Your brain is updating its prediction: "This is uncomfortable, not dangerous."

The rules of good exposure

1. **Graded.** Build a ladder from easier to harder. Start with something challenging but doable.
2. **Long enough.** Stay until you have learned what you came to learn: the feared thing did not happen, or you coped with it.
3. **Repeated.** Once is not enough. Practise each step several times, ideally daily.
4. **No safety behaviours.** No distraction, no escape plan, no reassurance. They stop the learning.
5. **Your choice.** You decide what to do and when. Nobody will spring anything on you.

> **The aim**
> Not to feel no anxiety. The aim is to learn that anxiety is safe and passes, and that the thing you fear is less likely or less terrible than it seems.

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What am I avoiding?

List what you have been avoiding, and how much each thing matters to you.

Name _____ Date _____

Avoidance builds up slowly, so it is easy to miss how much you have stopped doing. List what you are staying away from, how anxious it would make you, and how much it matters to you to get it back.

What I avoid	Anxiety if I did it (0 to 100)	How much I want it back (0 to 10)
Places and situations		
Activities		
People, or kinds of contact		
Body sensations, thoughts or memories		

What has avoiding cost me?

The one I would most like to tackle first

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My exposure ladder

Break a fear down into steps, from easiest to hardest.

Name _____ Date _____

The fear I am working on

My goal. What do I want to be able to do?

Brainstorm situations related to this fear. Rate how anxious each would make you, from 0 (none) to 100 (the most you can imagine). Then place them on the ladder with the hardest at the top. Vary things like distance, time, and whether you are alone to create in-between steps.

Step	Situation	Anxiety (0 to 100)
10 (hardest)		
9		
8		
7		
6		
5		
4		
3		
2		
1 (easiest)		

Start with a step rated around 30 to 50. Repeat it until it feels noticeably easier, then move up.

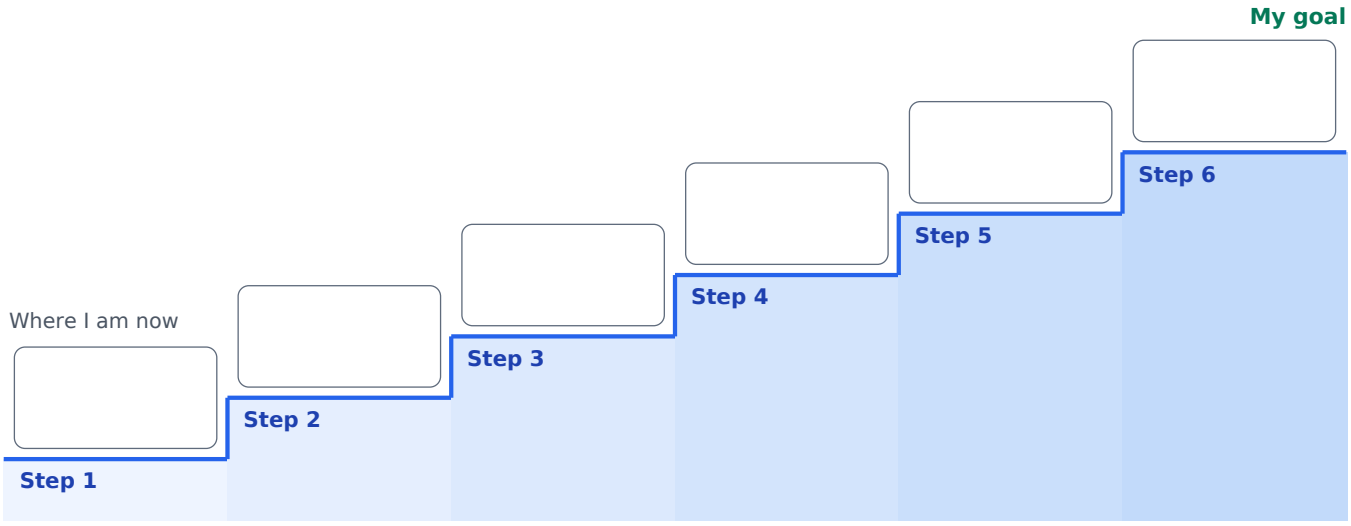
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Going out again: my step plan

A ladder of steps back into the places you have been avoiding, with a weekly record.

Name _____ Date _____

Where I want to be able to go, or what I want to be able to do



Make each step a bit harder than the last. You can change one thing at a time: how far, how long, how busy, and whether someone is with you.

Date	Step	What I predicted	Anxiety at peak (0 to 100)	What happened

Practise each step several times before moving up. Stay until you have found out what you needed to know.

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Out-and-about session plan

Planning a therapy session in the real world.

Name _____ Date _____

Before we go

What I want to get from this session

Where we will go and what we will do, in order

What I predict will happen

What I would like my therapist to do

Where to be, and when to step back

What I will try not to do

Safety behaviours I am going to drop

How we will stop or pause if I need to

Afterwards

What actually happened

Highest anxiety

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

None Extreme

Anxiety at the end

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

None Extreme

What I learned, and what I will practise by myself before next time

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Exposure practice record

A record of each exposure practice, with anxiety ratings.

Name _____ Date _____

The step I am practising

What I predict will happen

Date	How long	Anxiety before	Anxiety at peak	Anxiety at end	What I learned

Looking down the columns, what do I notice? Did my prediction come true?

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Dropping a safety behaviour

Find out what happens when you let go of one precaution.

Name _____ Date _____

The safety behaviour I am going to drop (what I usually do to feel safe)

The situation where I will try it

What I fear will happen if I do not do it

How strongly do I believe that?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What I will do instead (for example: look up and keep my hands relaxed)

What actually happened

How strongly do I believe my fear now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What does this tell me about how much I need the safety behaviour?

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