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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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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