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.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.