

CRUFADclinic
Patient Homework

Module 4

Graded exposure, avoidance & safety behaviours



St Vincent's Hospital

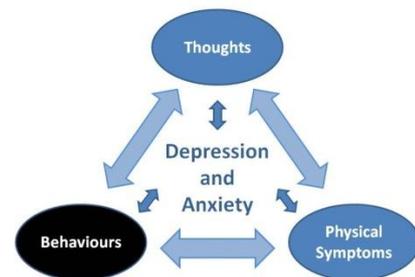
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1. Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

In lesson 2, you learnt that there are two types of behavioural symptoms of depression and anxiety:

1. **Low Activity** - this is when you don't do things because you lack energy or motivation. This is common in depression (we talked about this in Lesson 2).
2. **Avoidance** - this is when you avoid situations because of fear. This is common in anxiety and depression.



Avoidance is a very common symptom of anxiety and depression. When people become depressed and anxious, they avoid activities that they **fear** or **feel they can't cope** with.

In this lesson you learnt that there are two main types of avoidance symptoms in anxiety. These are:

- **Obvious avoidance behaviours** - this is when you avoid particular places, situations or people.
- **Subtle avoidance or safety behaviours** - this is when you do subtle things in anxiety-provoking situations to help keep you safe or to **cope** with anxiety.

While avoidance and safety behaviours **may seem helpful** because they **reduce your anxiety in the short-term**, they are actually problematic and can be responsible for maintaining your anxiety in the long-term. This is because, in the long-term;

1. **They prevent you from learning** that a lot of your fears might not come true, or might not be as catastrophic as you imagine.
2. **They lead you to believe** that you wouldn't be able to cope if something bad did happen.
3. **They prevent you from learning** that, although unpleasant, symptoms are normal and very rarely harmful.

Let's use a very simple example to examine why avoidance and safety behaviours might be problematic:

Imagine you were frightened of dogs. Every time you saw a dog, you became anxious because you thought that the dog would bite you. Over time, every time you saw a dog approaching you, you always walked across the road to the other side of the street (you **avoided** going near it).

By avoiding dogs, it may seem helpful to you because when you avoid them or walk away from them, your anxiety reduces (that is, it helps reduce your discomfort in the short-term).

However, if you never walked on the same side of the street as any dog, you would never have the opportunity to learn that:

- Not all dogs bite, and most of them are actually really friendly (that is, you never learn that you overestimated the likelihood that something bad might happen).
- You could cope with the anxiety (that you are underestimating your ability to cope).

Avoidance and safety behaviours contribute to people **over-estimating the likelihood of bad things happening** and **under-estimating their ability to cope**. They also keep the cycle of symptoms going.

Below are common examples of avoidance and safety behaviours:

| | AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOUR | SAFETY BEHAVIOUR |
|--|--|--|
| WHEN YOU FEAR PANIC ATTACKS | <input type="checkbox"/> Anything that could remind me of a panic symptoms or anxiety (e.g. caffeine, spicy food, exercise) | <input type="checkbox"/> Only go to places I am familiar with or stores where I know the staff |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Places where I might have a panic attack and not be able to get help | <input type="checkbox"/> Only go to unfamiliar places if the 'right' people are with me |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Places where I might have a panic attack and not be able to escape easily (e.g. shopping malls, large crowds) | <input type="checkbox"/> Always stay near the exit on buses/trains or in cafes/shops |
| | AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOUR | SAFETY BEHAVIOUR |
| WHEN YOU FEAR SOCIAL SITUATIONS | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid making eye contact and saying 'Hi' to people | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a few alcoholic drinks before going to social events |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid public speaking, parties, social gatherings and sit at the back of lectures | <input type="checkbox"/> Always have a bottle of water handy in case I get a dry mouth |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid any sort of behaviour that might put me in the spotlight | <input type="checkbox"/> Fiddle with my mobile phone in public so I don't make eye contact with others |
| WHEN YOU ARE | <input type="checkbox"/> Unplanned or familiar situations, things that "rock the boat" or disrupt | <input type="checkbox"/> Seek reassurance from other people about my decisions |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| GENERALLY | my routine | |
| ANXIOUS OR FEAR UNCERTAINTY | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid news, movies, TV shows that might remind me of my worries about friends, family or falling ill | <input type="checkbox"/> Make "To Do" lists (excessively) or be super-prepared for all possibilities |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination (it's easier than having to make tough decisions) | <input type="checkbox"/> Check on friends and family to make sure they are OK (even if I know there is no need to) |

Here are some other safety behaviours that are commonly used by people with depression and anxiety.

Tick any that apply:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty saying 'no' to others | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid making eye contact |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over planning | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid awkward silences, and talk too much |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Always having a 'Plan B' | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid being the centre of attention |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Only go to places with someone with me | <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking lots of water when feel anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having a few alcoholic drinks before going to | <input type="checkbox"/> Keep the same routine – avoid any unfamiliar situations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Staying near the exits on buses and trains or in cafes | <input type="checkbox"/> Excessively controlling situations/people (being overly responsible for things, not delegating, organising others, micromanaging situations) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive checking to make things "perfect" | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Putting your needs/preferences behind everyone else's. | |

Once you know what situations, people, and places you avoid (along with the safety behaviours you use), you can begin to do something about them.

2. Facing Fears Gradually Using Graded Exposure

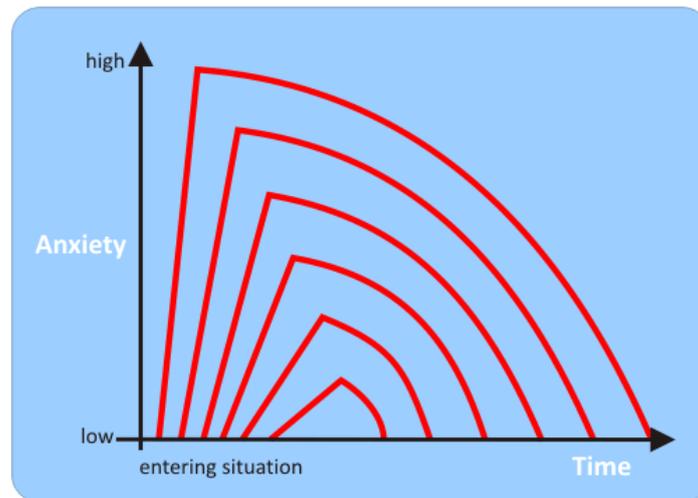
It is important that you practice **fighting against avoidance!** Graded exposure is one of the **most effective techniques** to tackle avoidance and **gradually face your fears.**

Graded exposure works to help you slowly build your confidence in your ability to cope with the situations you have been avoiding.

Why does graded exposure work?

When you confront a fear directly (by entering a situation which you're afraid of), the experience triggers the fight or flight response. If you went into a situation that triggers the fight or flight response, and you stayed there long enough, your anxiety would go down.

The graph shows that each time you confront an anxiety-provoking situation, your anxiety will rise, but not quite as high as the time before. When you expose yourself to the situation again and again, your anxiety will resolve quicker with each time.



- This is called “**gradual desensitization**”. This is when your body and brain learn that what you worry about does not actually happen, and if it did happen, it would not be disastrous.
- Each time you confront that situation you are **testing** out your worry and whether your prediction came true.
- However, it is important to remember that if you have used a **safety behaviour** you will not have properly tested your worry. Remember: Safety behaviours are a form of avoidance, so you are likely to think that the bad thing did not happen because of your safety behaviour, rather than because it was not going to happen.

Exposure Tests

Exposure Tests are a way to test your predictions and gently expose yourself to the situations you fear. We could tell you that your worries won’t eventuate, that you’ll be able to cope, and that you can overcome your worry. But, you probably won’t believe us. Instead, you need to be able to convince yourself. That’s why we strongly recommend that you learn to do Exposure Tests by using the Exposure Stepladder. In Lesson 4 you saw how Liz and Rob developed their own Exposure Stepladders. This is a very important part of treatment for depression and anxiety.

Why are Exposure Stepladders Important?

- They help to identify how your anxiety is different in different situations. Many people with depression and anxiety feel overwhelmed by their symptoms, and feel that they can't cope with "anything". But, this isn't true.
- Each step lets you really see what it is that worries you and what you fear. So, rather than just worrying about all situations, you can start to understand what triggers your anxiety. This will help you to start to gain control over your symptoms.
- The steps help you see that anxiety isn't "all" or "nothing". That is, by changing the aspects of the situation, such as the importance of a task, you can control how much anxiety you might feel.

Remember, **don't worry about the high level tasks** – we are only listing them here. Focus on the tasks that only cause a mild level of anxiety. If thinking about a task makes you feel unpleasant inside, then it isn't mild! And, we want you to start only with mild tasks.

3. Exposure Stepladders Explained

STEP 1: Write down your goal.

STEP 2: Create your own list of anxiety triggers (or a list of similar situations that would trigger a range of anxiety levels from low to high, with varying levels of difficulty).

STEP 3: Rate or rank the tasks from lowest to highest. We call this an exposure stepladder.



STEP 4: Pick a low level (easy) task to practice. Make sure you write down what you predict (what you think will happen in the task) **before doing the task**, then do the task, and then **reflect** on what happened.

It is essential that you write down your predictions - this way you can look back on what you thought might happen and compare this with what really did happen. **Repeat Step 4** again and again until the anxiety fades away. Then pick a slightly more challenging task/situation and do the same.

Here is an example of Steps 1 to 3.

Step 1. Goal: Make a speech at my sister's wedding

Step 2 and 3. Brainstorm similar situations and rank them from easiest to hardest:

1. Ask a question in a university tutorial
2. Rehearse wedding speech in front of the mirror
3. Make a toast at friend's birthday dinner

4. Rehearse wedding speech in front of a close friend
5. Take an active part in tutorial discussion
6. Rehearse wedding speech in front of a group of friends
7. Give assignment presentation in university tutorial
8. Make speech at wedding

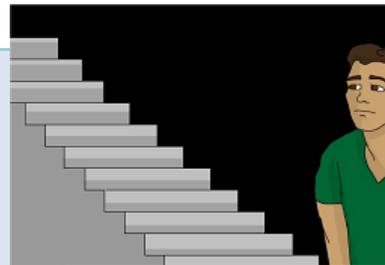
If you would like to face one of your fears, you can create your own Exposure Stepladder. We have provided the Facing Fears Worksheet at the end of this Summary, to help you plan a graded exposure stepladder. You can then work through the steps slowly. It will take time, but your confidence will grow steadily. Remember to challenge your unhelpful thinking any time you do a task from your stepladder.

Rob's Exposure Stepladder

You can see from Rob's Stepladder (below) that each step is slightly more difficult than the previous one. Rob is terrified of the tasks near the top of the Stepladder, but he needs to build a Stepladder so that he can develop a plan for learning to manage his symptoms

Rob built his confidence up by attending different types of social situations, each slightly more difficult than the last.

Remember, Rob started by working on tasks at levels 20 or 30 only. And, he only moved up the Stepladder when those tasks became easy.



GOAL: Reduce Social Withdrawal

- **Very High:**
Attend large social gathering (party)
- **High:**
Attend medium size social gathering
- **Medium:**
Attend picnic with close friends
Sit in lunchroom with work colleagues
- **Low:**
Have coffee/lunch with colleague
- **Lowest:**
Have coffee/drink with one or two close friends

How Rob Comp

st

| STEP | |
|--------------------|--|
| WHAT IS MY TASK? | <input type="checkbox"/> Have lunch with colleague |
| WHAT DO I PREDICT? | <input type="checkbox"/> I'll have nothing to say, there will be awkward silences, she will think I'm stupid, I'll feel incredibly anxious |

| | |
|--|---|
| WHAT WAS THE RESULT? | <input type="checkbox"/> It felt uncomfortable at first, but I was able to stay focused on the conversation |
| WHAT DID I LEARN? | <input type="checkbox"/> I overestimated how bad it would be |
| WHEN WILL I PRACTICE IT AGAIN OR AM I READY FOR THE NEXT STEP? | <input type="checkbox"/> Plan lunch again with another colleague for Thursday lunchtime. I need to keep practicing this step until I feel more confident with it. |

Your Exposure Stepladder

You can now create your own Stepladder. Ask yourself “what is my anxiety level?” which might help you to “measure” or predict the right level of anxiety for each level. Sometimes people underestimate how much anxiety they think a situation might cause – so think carefully about how much anxiety a situation may provoke when you fill in your own stepladder. Also, choose tasks that you can practice regularly.



| | |
|---|--|
| <p>VERY HIGH ANXIETY I can barely stand it</p> <p>HIGH ANXIETY My heart is racing</p> <p>MEDIUM - Unpleasant I really don't want to be here</p> <p>LOW - Mild anxiety I'm aware of my tension, but I can handle this</p> <p>VERY LOW -A bit of tension I'm fine, this just feels a bit odd</p> | <p>GOAL: _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very High: • High: • Medium: • Low: • Lowest: |
|---|--|

So how do you use your Stepladder?

Tips for successful Exposure Tasks:

- Pick a low anxiety task first** (it is important you pick a task you will succeed at)
- Stay in the situation** until the anxiety drops
- Repeat the same task** (step of the stepladder) again and again until it becomes easy

- Only when it has become easy**, then you can **move onto a higher** level task
- Expose yourself to the situation at least 3 times per week** until you get used to that level of anxiety.
- Evaluate the task** after you've completed it: did your predictions and worries come true? What really happened? What did you learn for next time?

The idea is that you do each task repeatedly, until it doesn't cause you anxiety any more, and until it becomes an **easy** task. Then you move on to the next one. Use the "Facing Your Fears" Worksheet to help you.

What you should remember:

- ★ **Your symptoms did not arrive over night, so they won't go away overnight.** If you need to keep working at your low anxiety level step for a week, that is fine. If you need to stay working at that level for two weeks, that is OK too. Take the time you need and only move on when you feel you are making progress.
- ★ **It is not a race.** Please don't jump in the deep end. The success of this entire task depends on working gradually and consistently, so start at the low anxiety tasks and only move up when they become provoke very low anxiety.
- ★ **Don't use safety behaviours!** If you find yourself needing to use a safety behaviour to get through one of your steps, you might have bitten off more than you can chew. Look at the task, break it down into less anxiety provoking steps and build your way back up from a lower anxiety level.
- ★ **Practice, practice, practice ... and then practice some more.** The Stepladder only works if you are willing to give it a go with regular practice. It will not work if you only try it once. It is a new skill that takes time and practice to become familiar with, so practice and practice regularly.
- ★ **Reward your hard work!** This is important! The exposure Stepladder is not an easy task. So practice it regularly, put in your best effort, and **reward yourself** for all the hard work you are putting in!

In lesson 5, you will learn to trouble-shoot difficulties you might have with exposure. However, for now, it's important that you get started facing your fears!

As you start to reflect on the role of avoidance in your life, you may come to realise that there are particular situations you avoid due to anxiety or fear. These might include situations such as social events, being assertive, going to work, driving and so on. When you are designing your own stepladders, think of:

- Situations you fear, physical sensations you fear, particular tasks you fear

Some Examples of Graded Exposure Stepladders

EXPOSURE FOR BEING ASSERTIVE (GOAL: TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE)

SYMPTOM LEVEL

TASKS

| | |
|------------------|---|
| VERY HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss your feelings about an important issue with a work colleague or a family member without making apologies. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask someone to stop a behaviour that is annoying you (e.g. a flat mate who doesn't clean up). <input type="checkbox"/> Speak up in a social event. <input type="checkbox"/> Speak up in a meeting. <input type="checkbox"/> Say no to a task at work. |
| HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Buy an item from a store and then later ask for a refund/store credit (keep the receipt, but ask for a refund without bringing it!). <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss your feelings about a non-confrontational issue with a colleague. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss your feelings about an important issue with a close friend. |
| MEDIUM | <input type="checkbox"/> Ask a store attendant for a discount on a non-sale item in a store. <input type="checkbox"/> Politely decline a request from a friend. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss your feelings about a non-confrontational issue with a family member. <input type="checkbox"/> Write a critical post on an internet discussion board. |
| LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Politely postpone a request from a friend. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask a shop keeper in a store to tell you more about a product. <input type="checkbox"/> Pay for something in small change. <input type="checkbox"/> Say to someone who makes a request of you, 'I don't know but I will get back to you,' even if you will do it anyway. |
| VERY LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Politely ask a favour of a friend. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask a store attendant to show you where an item is in the store. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask someone unfamiliar the time or ask them for directions. |

EXPOSURE FOR REASSURANCE SEEKING (GOAL: TO LEARN TO BE MORE COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY/NOT KNOWING 100%)

| SYMPTOM LEVEL | TASKS |
|------------------|---|
| VERY HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Leave mobile phone at home for 1 day. <input type="checkbox"/> For one day, do not say sorry or pre-empt checking with anyone unless there is clear evidence to do so. <input type="checkbox"/> Delay responding to an email unless an emergency for 1 day. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't apologise for anything for a full day. |
| HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce pre-emptive checking in with people to once per day. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not check the news for one day. <input type="checkbox"/> Delay responding to emails for over 1 hour. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking mobile for text messages and missed calls to once per day. |
| MEDIUM | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce pre-emptive checking in with people to 3 times a day. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking news to twice per day. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking mobile for text messages and missed calls to 3 times a day. |
| LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce pre-emptive checking in with people to 4 times per day. <input type="checkbox"/> Delay responding to emails and missed calls for 30 minutes. |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking mobile for text messages and missed calls to 5 times a day. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking the news to 4 times a day. |
| VERY LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking mobile for text messages and missed calls to 8 times a day. <input type="checkbox"/> Delay responding to emails and missed calls for 10 minutes. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking the news to 6 times a day. |

EXPOSURE REDUCING PERFECTIONISM (GOAL: TO LEARN TO COPE WITH MISTAKES AND NOT BE SO SELF CRITICAL)

| SYMPTOM LEVEL | TASKS |
|------------------|---|
| VERY HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Do not use a 'To Do' list for one day. <input type="checkbox"/> Leave a mistake (e.g. a typo) in a report and hand it in. <input type="checkbox"/> Leave yourself 15 mins to get ready before going out. <input type="checkbox"/> Give yourself only one night to write a report or essay. <input type="checkbox"/> Go out without checking yourself in the mirror. |
| HIGH | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking of work to 2 checks. <input type="checkbox"/> Delegate a work task to a colleague. <input type="checkbox"/> Leave yourself 30 min to get ready before going out. <input type="checkbox"/> Send an email to a superior with a typo or spelling mistake. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce preparation for meetings to 5 min. |
| MEDIUM | <input type="checkbox"/> Make an impulsive decision. <input type="checkbox"/> Arrive at work 10 min late and leave 10 min early. <input type="checkbox"/> Leave house untidy 3 times a week. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking of work tasks to 3 checks per day. <input type="checkbox"/> Delegate small parts of an important job to a colleague. <input type="checkbox"/> Leave the house untidy and invite guests over. |
| LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Miss one workout for the week. <input type="checkbox"/> Give yourself 40 min to get ready before going out. <input type="checkbox"/> Delegate a minor work task to a colleague. <input type="checkbox"/> Send an email to a friend with a few typos or spelling mistakes in it. <input type="checkbox"/> Arrive at work 5 min late and leave 5 min early. |
| VERY LOW | <input type="checkbox"/> Leave dirty dishes in the sink overnight. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce checking work tasks to 4 times. <input type="checkbox"/> Send an email to a friend/colleague with a typo or spelling mistake in it. |