

Graded Exposure

Graded Exposure is a way of treating a range of anxiety problems.

It works best with simple phobias or other anxiety problems where you can identify what it is that you are anxious about.

The basic idea is to gradually expose yourself to the feared situation in a way that allows you to **control** your fear at each step.

If you get the steps right – in terms of how difficult each one is – you should be able to master your anxiety at each stage and conquer your fear.

How Graded Exposure works:

1. Identify your feared situation.
2. Break down the gap between where you are now and where you need to be into small, manageable steps (see below).
3. Identify and learn to master the situations that cause mild anxiety.
4. Confront your fears regularly and frequently.
5. Progressively overcome the situations that are linked with the main anxiety.

It's important not to avoid the root of your anxiety, or use 'safety behaviours' (like always having a friend with you, using alcohol or a lucky talisman).

Example of Graded Exposure steps:

Goal: To travel alone by train to the city and back

1. Travelling one stop, at a quiet time of day
2. Travelling two stops, at a quiet time of day
3. Travelling two stops, during rush hour
4. Travelling five stops, at a quiet time of day
5. Travelling five stops, during rush hour
6. Travelling all the way, at a quiet time of day
7. Travelling all the way, during rush hour

Firstly, repeat step 1 until you feel comfortable. Your anxiety won't disappear, but it should reduce, allowing you to move on to step 2.

When you move onto the next step, your anxiety levels will rise again, so again, you need to repeat this step until it subsides, before moving on.

This process may take a long time, but it will help overcome anxieties that seemed impossible at the start. It helps to keep a diary of your progress, keeping track of your anxiety levels at the beginning and end of each step. See the example below.

For many people, it helps to learn simple relaxation techniques to help master your anxiety while progressing through the steps. There are many resources to help you relax, including the relaxation tracks on the Headroom website (www.bbc.co.uk/headroom/newsandevents/meditation.shtml) or the relaxation information on the BBC Health site (www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_relaxation.shtml).

Example diary:

	TARGET	ANXIETY (INITIAL)	ANXIETY (FINAL)	COMMENTS
DAY 1	1: one stop, quiet	80%	50%	
DAY 3	1: one stop, quiet	75%	20%	
DAY 4	1: one stop, quiet	33%	5% relaxed	Goal 1 reached
DAY 6	2: two stops, quiet	50%	50% (but I'll try again)	
DAY 7	2: two stops, quiet	75%	20%	
DAY 9	2: two stops, quiet	40%	5% relaxed	Goal 2 reached
DAY 12	3: two stops, rush hour	75%	66%	Not surprising really, I'll continue