Exposure Therapy

Facing fears a little at a time, so they lose their power over you.

What is exposure?

Exposure means facing, on purpose, a situation you have been avoiding because it makes you anxious. You do it in small, planned steps, and you stay until the anxiety starts to ease, instead of leaving at once.

Why avoidance keeps anxiety going

Avoiding a feared situation brings quick relief, so you keep avoiding it. But avoidance has a cost:

- You never find out whether the feared thing would really happen.
- You never find out whether you could cope with it if it did — and your life gets smaller, as more situations feel off limits.

Exposure works the other way. Each time you face a feared situation and stay with it, you learn something new: the situation is safer than you thought, and you can cope with the anxiety.

When you face a feared situation, anxiety usually rises first, then slowly falls on its own if you stay. Leaving early stops this learning.

Build your ladder

Pick one fear to work on. Break it into small steps, from easiest to hardest. Rate each step from 0 to 10, where 0 is no fear at all and 10 is the worst fear you can imagine. Start with a step rated about 3 or 4 — hard enough to feel some anxiety, but not so hard that you cannot stay with it.

Example ladder — going to a busy shop:

Step	Fear (0–10)
Walk past the shop, without going in	3
Go in for 2 minutes, buy one small item	5
Go in at a busy time, stand in line to pay	9

Repeat a step until it feels easier, then move to the next one.

> **One rule:** do not use safety habits that stop the learning — for example, keeping your eyes down, holding your phone the whole time, or rushing through it. Face the situation as it is, so you can learn from it.

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My ladder, and a plan for each step.

My ladder

Fear I am working on: _____

Step	Fear (0–10)

Plan one step

- **Before:** pick the step, and decide how long you will stay. Write down what you expect will happen.
- **During:** stay for the time you planned. Let the anxiety rise and fall. Notice what really happens, instead of what you feared.
- **After:** write down what happened, and what you learned. Rate your anxiety before and after, from 0 to 10.

What I learned

Step I tried	Anxiety before (0–10)	Anxiety after (0–10)	What happened? What did I learn?

Good to know

- **Practice often.** Short, regular practice works better than one long try.
- **If a step feels too hard,** break it into a smaller step. Do not skip ahead to a much harder step.
- **Setbacks are normal.** A hard day does not undo your progress. Go back to a step you have done before, and build up again.
- **Talk about it in the group.** Bring your ladder and your notes. The group can help you plan the next step.