

Facing Your Fears Ladder

A Step-by-Step Guide to Gradual Exposure

What This Worksheet Is For

Avoidance can feel safe in the moment, but over time, it makes fears stronger. This worksheet is designed to help you face your fears in small, manageable steps using a strategy known as graded exposure. Whether you're working with anxiety, phobias, panic, trauma, or social fears, exposure therapy can help retrain your brain to respond with less fear and more confidence.

By completing this worksheet, you will:

- Identify a fear that interferes with your life
- Break it down into smaller steps (a "fear ladder")
- Learn to face those fears one step at a time
- Plan your first exposure practice

Clinicians can use this worksheet to collaboratively develop exposure hierarchies with clients and reinforce behavioral activation and emotional regulation strategies along the way.

Step 1: Identify the Fear

Think of one situation, place, object, or thought that triggers anxiety or fear. Be as specific as possible.

What fear or situation would you like to work on?

Step 2: Brainstorm Related Situations

Now, think of 5–10 situations or actions related to this fear. Some will be mildly uncomfortable, while others may feel overwhelming. The goal is to identify different levels of difficulty.

What situations relate to your fear? What are small, medium, and large challenges connected to it?

Situation	Anxiety Rating (0–10)

Step 3: Build Your Fear Ladder

Now put those situations in order—from least to most anxiety-provoking. This becomes your Fear Ladder.

Step	Situation	Anxiety (0–10)
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

You don't need to face the top right away. You'll begin at the bottom rung and work your way up over time.

Step 4: Plan Your First Exposure

Start with the first (lowest) step on your ladder. Write out your plan so you feel prepared and supported.

What is your first exposure step?

When will you do it?

Date & time: _____

Where will it take place?

What coping strategies will you use if you feel anxious?

What will success look like for this step?
Success = doing it, even if anxiety is present.

Step 5: Reflect and Prepare to Climb

After completing the first exposure, take time to reflect.

How did it go? What did you learn?

Were the results different than you feared?

What will you do next?

- ☐ Repeat this step until your anxiety goes down
- ☐ Move to the next step on the ladder
- ☐ Adjust your ladder and keep going

Moving Forward

Facing your fears is an act of courage. It takes time, effort, and support—but every step forward is progress. Keep practicing regularly, track your progress with a journal or in therapy, and celebrate small wins along the way.

Tip: Anxiety often rises before and during exposure, but it typically falls if you stay in the situation long enough. The more you face your fear, the more your brain learns: “I can handle this.”

Clinician Note:

Use this worksheet to collaborate with clients in exposure planning. Encourage repeated exposures to the same rung before progressing and incorporate distress tolerance strategies where needed. Revisit and adjust the ladder throughout treatment.