FEAR HIERARCHY

A MIND & MEANING THERAPY RESOURCE

When something makes you anxious, the natural response is to avoid it, run away from it, or to ensure you don't experience it again. This brings quick relief, but over time it teaches your brain that the situation really is dangerous, rather than something you can tolerate.

A fear hierarchy is the first step in exposure work. It helps you spot things that spike your anxiety or that you've been avoiding. The ladder helps you list these, from mild to most distressing. From here, you can begin to face your feared situations and change your relationship with anxiety.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET

STEP 1: NAME THE FEAR

In a few words, describe the fear you want to work on. Keep it broad, such as "health conditions", "social situations" or "driving".

STEP 2: LIST THE SITUATIONS

Write down the triggers, events and everyday activities that would cause you anxiety, discomfort or distress if you were to do them. Include the small ones too.

STEP 3: RATE EACH ONE

Give each situation a number from 0 to 100 for how distressed you predict you'd feel if you were placed in it today. There are no right answers.

STEP 4: BUILD YOUR LADDER

Copy your situations onto the ladder, lowest score at the bottom and highest at the top. We'll begin on the lower rungs and work upwards at your pace.

Aim for 10 to 15 situations with a good spread of scores. If everything feels like a 90, try breaking the bigger situations into smaller pieces. Changing the time, the place or who you're with can make a step easier or harder.

RATING YOUR DISTRESS

0	25	50	75	100
Calm. No distress at all	**Mild.** Noticeable but manageable	**Moderate.** Uncomfortable and hard to ignore	**Strong.** I'd really want to escape	**Extreme.** The most distress I can imagine

This worksheet is based on graded exposure, a technique used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

HEALTH ANXIETY

AN EXAMPLE HIERARCHY

Here's how a hierarchy might look for someone living with health anxiety. Your own list will look different, but feel free to borrow ideas from the situations below. The scores are only there to show the idea.

THE FEAR I'M WORKING ON: *Health conditions*

#	SITUATION, TRIGGER OR ACTIVITY	DISTRESS (0-100)
1	Say feared words aloud, such as "cancer", "heart attack", "tumour" or "MS".	25
2	Read an article about a feared condition.	45
3	Watch a short medical scene on TV without checking symptoms afterwards.	55
4	Look at the NHS website for a feared condition, without searching any further.	80
5	Listen to someone talk about illness and resist checking yourself for symptoms.	65
6	Keep watching a health advert instead of muting or leaving the room.	30

HERE IS HOW THOSE WORK AS A "FEAR LADDER"

TOP STEPS 70 to 100	6	Look at the NHS website for a feared condition, without searching further.	80
MIDDLE STEPS 40 to 69	5	Listen to someone talk about illness and resist checking yourself for symptoms.	65
	4	Watch a short medical scene on TV without checking symptoms afterwards.	55
	3	Read an article about a feared condition.	45
STARTING STEPS 0 to 39	2	Keep watching a health advert instead of muting or leaving the room.	30
	1	Say feared words aloud, such as "cancer" or "tumour".	25

↑ START YOUR EXPOSURES AT NUMBER 1 AND WORK UPWARDS

PART 1 OF 2

MY FEAR AND MY SITUATIONS

Name the fear, then list anything that would cause you anxiety, discomfort or distress if you were to do it. Rate each one from 0 to 100 for how distressed you predict you'd feel.

THE FEAR I'M WORKING ON

In broad terms, what describes the fear I face?

#	SITUATION, TRIGGER OR ACTIVITY	DISTRESS (0–100)
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		

PART 2 OF 2

MY EXPOSURE LADDER

Copy your situations onto the ladder, with the lowest score on number 1 and the highest at the top. We'll start at the bottom. When a step starts to feel more manageable, that's your cue to move up to the next one. There is no need to have all 12 in place; just list as many as you can.

TOP STEPS
70 to 100

12		/100
11		/100
10		/100
9		/100

MIDDLE STEPS
40 to 69

8		/100
7		/100
6		/100
5		/100

STARTING STEPS
0 to 39

4		/100
3		/100
2		/100
1		/100

↑ START YOUR EXPOSURES AT NUMBER 1 AND WORK UPWARDS

WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?

While anyone can complete exposure work to face their fears, it's highly recommended that you work with a trained therapist. Exposure is meant to feel uncomfortable, and a therapist can help you pace each step, spot safety behaviours and look after yourself along the way.

If a step leaves you feeling overwhelmed or unsafe, pause and reach out for support before going further.