

Overcoming particular fears (phobias)ⁱ

We do not know for sure why some people have fears that seem, even to them, to be irrational — such as a fear of eating in front of people, fear of being away from a safe place or fear of dogs. However, we do know what maintains the fears and keeps them going: avoidance. Avoiding the thing that you fear gives an immediate sense of relief in the short term. In the long term, however, the avoidance leads to embarrassment, lack of confidence and an increase in the fear. This can cause a vicious cycle. To break the cycle and overcome the fear, it is essential that you face the thing of which you are afraid. This is easier to do if you do it early on, when you first notice that there is a problem. If the fear you want to tackle is long-standing, it can still be overcome, but will take longer and require more persistence and help from others.

The key strategy for overcoming your fear involves constructing a plan gradually to expose yourself to what you fear, in small steps, so that you tackle what you fear without becoming too frightened. Make a list of the situations you avoid and that make you anxious, even if only mildly so. Then arrange these situations in order of difficulty. Some examples are set out below.

Example 1: Using public transport

With a friend:

- Walk to local bus stop to study the timetable.
- Wait at the bus stop. Allow bus to arrive, but do not get on.
- Wait at bus stop. Allow bus to arrive; get on and off again.
- Catch bus, go one stop and walk home.
- Catch bus, go two stops and walk home.
- Catch bus to local shops. Walk home.
- Catch bus to local shops. Catch bus home.

Repeat the activities on your own.

Example 2: Eating in public

With a friend:

- Go to a coffee shop with a friend. Order coffee but do not drink it.
- Go to coffee shop with a friend. Order coffee and drink it.
- Have a sandwich in a coffee shop with a friend.
- Have dinner in restaurant with a friend.
 - vary the time of day that you go
 - go into quiet and then busy shops/cafes
 - go to informal and formal places
 - repeat activities on your own.

Example 3: Feeling comfortable with groups of people

- Organize and go to a social event with a group of friends.
- Organize and go to a social event with a group of friends and some acquaintances.
- Organize and go to a social event with acquaintances only.
- Organize and go to a social event with work colleagues
 - vary the social events
 - vary the time of the day
 - vary the formality of the events.

Example 4: Leaving the house

- Walk alone to front gate.
- Walk alone along the street to the first lamp post.
- Walk alone along the street and stand outside the local store.
- Go into a shop with a friend.
- Walk alone and go into a shop without buying anything.
- Go into a supermarket with a friend.
- Go alone and buy something from the local store.
- Go alone to the supermarket and buy something.

Here are some general guidelines to help you make your own plan:

- ➔ Build up slowly: start with easy tasks and build up to harder tasks. The first step should make you slightly anxious but not frighten you so much you can hardly tackle it.
- ➔ Only move on to a harder task when you feel comfortable with the task you are working on.
- ➔ Practise tasks regularly, once a day is better than twice a week.
- ➔ Plan things you enjoy so that you have something to look forward to each time you move on a step.
- ➔ Expect setbacks and do not give up because of them. Everyone's confidence varies. If something is too hard, find ways of breaking it down into smaller steps or go more slowly.
- ➔ Discuss your problems with your doctor and/or your counsellor or a friend you trust.
- ➔ Get someone to help and encourage you. Give them a copy of the leaflet *Helping someone else overcome a phobia*.
- ➔ Do not use alcohol or drugs to cope with the feared situation.
- ➔ Learn and practise the breathing, rational thinking and relaxation exercises before you start, so that you can use them to help you reduce anxiety while you gradually face the fears.

Specific guidelines:

- ➔ Always stay in the situation until your anxiety level drops. If you leave the situation while your anxiety is high or when you are in a panic, you will experience relief. However, this will make your anxiety worse the next time you are confronted with a similar situation.
- ➔ Use slow-breathing strategies to control physical anxiety.
- ➔ Use 'rational thinking' strategies to replace unrealistic/negative thinking.
- ➔ Use relaxation before you expose yourself to the feared situation.

Your health worker can give you more information about slow breathing, dealing with anxious thinking and relaxation. Ask for the leaflets on these topics.

Remember: The rate of progress is different for different people. It does not matter how slowly you go; as long as you are practising, you will keep progressing and will get there in the end.

Keeping track of your progress

Exposure form and overall rating of how you feel

We recommend that you use this form every week to monitor your symptoms of anxiety for situations in which you have carried out exposure exercises.

Example situation: Getting used to speaking and asking for assistance

<i>Week</i>	<i>Specific task</i>	<i>Fear or avoidance score</i>			
		<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Mild</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Severe</i>
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
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Most people have ups and downs as they get over their problems. Occasional setbacks are normal. They do not mean that you are not making progress overall.

ⁱⁱ Adapted, with permission, from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care, a WHO Education Package*, 1998.