

What is Exposure Therapy?

It's natural to avoid what we fear, but this avoidance can quickly become all-consuming. Relationships, goals, and quality of life suffer. **Exposure therapy** is an evidence-based approach to confronting fears in a safe, systematic way. Guided by a therapist, a person faces their fears in manageable steps, leading to meaningful and even dramatic anxiety reduction.

📌 Common Fears Treated with Exposure Therapy

- ✓ contamination worries & OCD concerns
- ✓ social anxiety
- ✓ phobias (heights, spiders, dogs, etc.)
- ✓ upsetting memories & PTSD
- ✓ panic attacks
- ✓ any fear that involves avoidance

⚙️ How Exposure Therapy Works

1. The therapist and client create an exposure or fear hierarchy. This is a 0 to 100 rating of avoided situations, from least (0) to most distressing (100).
2. Starting with the lowest-rated fear, the client confronts the avoided scenarios using specific instructions from the therapist.
3. With practice, the client's fears diminish through a process known as habituation, leading to more time and energy to enjoy life and accomplish goals!

🗪 Types of Exposure Therapy

Imaginal	In Vivo ("In Life")	Combination
Vividly imagine the fears in the safety of a therapy session or at home using a script or audio recording.	Confront fears in real life in a structured way that is guided by the therapist.	Many therapists use a combination of these techniques depending on the fears and needs to be addressed.

📌 Other Information

- Exposure therapy should be done under the guidance of an experienced professional.
- Sometimes exposure therapy is combined with medication, such as an antidepressant.
- 86% of OCD sufferers who completed exposure therapy improved, according to one study.
- The benefits of exposure therapy for phobias can last for years after treatment.

Exposure Therapy in Action: Three Examples

Maria	Maria's Fear Hierarchy
<p>Maria is terrified of spiders and goes out of her way to avoid them.</p> <p>Guided by her therapist, Maria views a photo of a spider and watches a spider documentary. Maria later agrees to touch a spider that her therapist brings into the session, eventually even allowing the spider to walk over her bare arms.</p> <p>A week later, Maria takes her kids to a spider exhibition at the zoo. "I even enjoyed it!" Maria proudly tells her therapist in her final session.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">100 Let a large spider walk on arms90 Sit next to a spider in a terrarium85 Hike a trail where spiders are common80 Stand 5 feet from a spider in a web70 Watch a long documentary about spiders65 Watch a short video clip of a spider60 Look at a photo of a tarantula

Jim	Jim's Fear Hierarchy
<p>Jim avoids social events due to anxiety, resulting in ever greater isolation.</p> <p>In his early therapy sessions, Jim imagines attending a large gathering and lets himself feel the emotions this brings up. He later meets two close friends for coffee, braving his anxiety.</p> <p>Jim gradually attends larger gatherings, staying long enough for his anxiety to come down. Ready to tackle his greatest fear, Jim gives a speech at a large conference hosted by his employer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">100 Give presentation at large conference95 Attend holiday office party80 Eat at crowded restaurant with 3 friends75 Join 2 co-workers for lunch in break room70 Meet two close friends for coffee65 Greet several co-workers60 Imagine attending a large gathering

Luis	Luis's Fear Hierarchy
<p>Luis does not use public restrooms due to his fear of germs, which severely limits his outings.</p> <p>Luis's therapist asks him to record himself talking about the worst-possible outcome of coming into contact with germs. Luis listens to the recording over and over until it no longer feels so scary.</p> <p>Luis then graduates to spending ten seconds in a very clean public restroom. With practice, he extends this time to five minutes. Finally, he lingers for ten minutes in the filthiest restroom he can find!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">100 Stay 10 mins. in a filthy public restroom95 Stay 5 mins. in a filthy public restroom85 Touch stall and door in public restroom70 Enter and stay in clean restroom for 10s65 Record & listen to worst-case scenario60 Read restroom horror stories55 Describe a very dirty public restroom