Graduated Exposure – Using a Fear Ladder

An important step in learning to manage fears involves facing feared situations or places. It is normal for someone who is anxious to want to avoid the things they fear. However, avoidance prevents them from learning that feared situations or places are not dangerous. The process of facing fears is called EXPOSURE. Exposure involves repeatedly go into feared situations until one feels less anxious. Exposure is not dangerous and will not make the fear worse. After awhile, the anxiety will naturally lessen. Starting with situations that are less scary, people can work their way up to facing things that cause them a great deal of anxiety. Over time, they build up confidence in those situations and may come to enjoy them. Exposure is one of the most effective ways of overcoming fears. However, it takes some planning, encouragement, modeling and rewards.

Step 1: Understanding
Help the person understand the importance of facing fears.

Use an example. Ask the following question:

"Tim is afraid of the water, but really wants to spend time with his friends at the swimming pool. What can he do to stop being afraid of the water?"
Many people understand that, in order to stop being afraid of something, they need to face it.

You can give the following explanation to help the person understand.

"It is important for you to face your fears so that you can learn that those situations are safe. Although it can be scary at first, with practice you will feel less anxious. You can start with some things that are less scary and take small steps towards facing the things that are scarier. Over time, you will feel better in those situations and may end up really enjoying them."

Step 2: Setting a Goal
Ask the person to identify a specific **goal**. This must be something that they would like to be able to do but are currently unable to because of their fear. It is important not to impose our goals at this stage.

Step 3: Make a Plan/Ladder
List the steps needed to achieve that goal with the order of steps representing what the person fears least to what they fear most – this may not match our perceptions of what would be least/most scary. It is important to consider factors that may affect fear level. Some examples include: length of time, time of day, environment and who is with the person. Rate each step (e.g. if there are 10 steps then the first/least scary would be 1/10 and the last/most scary would be 10/10)

Each ladder should include a whole range of situations. The ladder should identify some things the person can do now with some anxiety, some things he or she can do now with

moderate anxiety and, finally, the things he or she finds too difficult to do now. It is important to start really small and take gradual steps.

Step 4: Start Climbing

Starting with the situation that causes the least anxiety, encourage the person to repeatedly engage in that activity until he or she starts to feel less anxious doing it. If the situation is one that the person can remain in for a period of time (such as being close to a dog), encourage him or her to stay in the situation long enough to see anxiety lessen (e.g., standing next to a dog for 20-30 minutes). Once the person is able to enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety, he or she can move on to the next thing on the list.

It is important to practice on a regular basis. Some things can be practiced daily (e.g., spending time alone in a part of the house without staff in the same room), while other things can only be done once in a while (e.g. going to a dance). However, the more the person practices the faster the fear will fade.

Don't Rush! It can be very scary facing the things one fears. Be encouraging and recognize that the person needs to go at his or her own pace.

End each practice session on a positive note – praise the effort made and plan a relaxing or enjoyable activity to follow the practice session.

Step 5: Celebrate Progress

Help the person to track his or her progress and celebrate the achievement of each step. It may be helpful to use specific rewards as motivation to achieve each step. Encourage the person to also reward him or herself with positive self-talk (for example, "I really tried hard!") and enjoyable activities (for example, watching a favorite movie) after facing a feared situation.

Adapted from AnxietyBC