



Facing Fears One Step at a Time

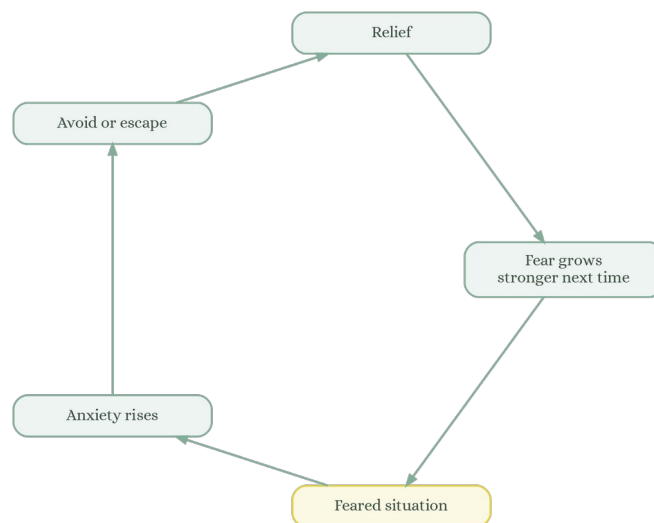
An explainer, fear ladder, and exposure log · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Avoidance keeps fears alive. Approaching them, gradually, helps them shrink.
- Exposure therapy is one of the most effective treatments for phobias and anxiety.
- You stay in control of the pace. Small, repeated steps work best.

How fears grow

Avoiding something scary brings instant relief. But your brain learns, "Good thing I escaped. That was dangerous." The next time, the fear is stronger. This cycle can turn a small fear into a big one.



How exposure works

Exposure means gradually and repeatedly facing what you fear, without escaping. Each time, your brain gathers new evidence: "I can handle this," and "The bad outcome didn't happen." Fears don't vanish, but new, safer learning grows strong enough to win.

Principle	What it means
Start manageable	Begin with a step that's challenging but doable (about 3–4 out of 10)

Principle	What it means
Stay long enough	Remain until you learn something new, not just until anxiety drops
Repeat	Practise each step several times
Climb gradually	Move up the ladder when a step feels more manageable

What the research says

Exposure-based treatments are highly effective for specific phobias (Wolitzky-Taylor, Horowitz, Powers & Telch, 2008).

A single, intensive session of guided exposure can produce lasting improvement for many specific phobias (Öst, 1989).

Modern research suggests exposure works by building new "safety" learning that competes with fear (Craske et al., 2014).

Tool: My Fear Ladder and Exposure Log

Step	Situation (from least to most scary)	Fear (0–10)
8		
7		
6		
5		
4		
3		
2		
1		

Exposure log

Date	Step I practised	What I predicted	Fear peak (0–10)	What actually happened

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Strategies to try

- **Celebrate effort.** Each step is a win, whether or not anxiety drops.
- **Don't rush.** Too big a jump can backfire. Steady progress lasts.
- **Practise regularly.** Several short practices a week beat one occasional big one.
- **Use support wisely.** Bring a support person early on, then gradually practise without them.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Aim for surprise, not calm.** Newer research suggests exposure works best when you learn something unexpected, like "I stayed and nothing bad happened," rather than waiting for anxiety to drop. Before each step, write your prediction. After, write what actually happened.
- **Mix it up.** Practise in different places, times of day, and with different versions of the feared thing. Variety helps the new learning stick.
- **Drop safety behaviours.** Once a step feels easier, repeat it without your "safety" items, like a water bottle, a support person, or your phone in hand.
- **Try a "one-session" approach.** For some specific phobias, a single, longer guided session of about three hours can lead to lasting change. Ask a therapist whether this fits your fear.
- **Add curiosity.** Ask questions about the feared thing: "How does a spider's web work?" Curiosity competes with fear and helps you stay present.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What fear has been limiting my life the most?

What have I avoided because of it?

What would I do if this fear were smaller?

What strengths have helped me face hard things before?

When to reach out for support

If a fear causes significant distress or limits your life, a therapist can guide you through exposure safely and effectively. Many phobias improve in a small number of sessions.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Craske, M. G., Treanor, M., Conway, C. C., Zbozinek, T., & Vervliet, B. (2014). Maximizing exposure therapy: An inhibitory learning approach. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 58, 10–23.

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