Creating an Exposure Hierarchy

Reminders of trauma can trigger uncomfortable emotions, painful memories, and debilitating symptoms. It's normal to want to avoid these reactions. Over time, however, avoidance causes these reactions to worsen. **Exposure** is a technique to combat avoidance. During exposure, you'll purposefully face trauma reminders in a safe and controlled way.

Example Exposure Activities					
Talk about my trauma	Go to the location of my trauma	Go somewhere that reminds me of my trauma	Participate in an activity that reminds me of my trauma		
Hold an object that reminds me of my trauma	Watch a TV show or movie that reminds me of my trauma	Read a book related to my trauma	Listen to music that reminds me of my trauma		
Write the story of my trauma	Mentally review the story of my trauma	Draw or paint trauma reminders	Prepare food that reminds me of my trauma		
Play a video game that reminds me of my trauma	Listen to someone talk about a similar trauma	Wear something that reminds me of my trauma	Look at appropriate images that remind me of my trauma		

Qualities of Good Exposure Activities

Safe. While activities will be uncomfortable for you, they should never be unsafe.

Controllable. Activities should not depend on other people or events. For example, "be approached by a stranger" or "watch news about a hurricane near me" are not within your control.

Specific. The activity "walk a dog" is too vague. What dog will you walk? Where? A better activity would be "ask my neighbors to walk their dog for 30 minutes in our neighborhood."

Repeatable. Ensure you'll be able to do each activity at least four times.

Tip: Include activities with a range of distress ratings. You'll work your way up from those with lower ratings to those with higher ratings.

Exposure Hierarchy

An **exposure hierarchy** is a tool to rank trauma reminders that cause you distress, and that you typically avoid. You'll create your hierarchy by ranking situations from least to most distressing on a scale of 0-100, where 0 is "no distress at all" and 100 is "the most distress imaginable."

Example

Activity	Distress Rating
Read three news articles about car accidents.	
For 30 minutes, listen to the music that was playing during my car accident.	
Drive on the road where I had my car accident.	

Activity	Distress Rating