

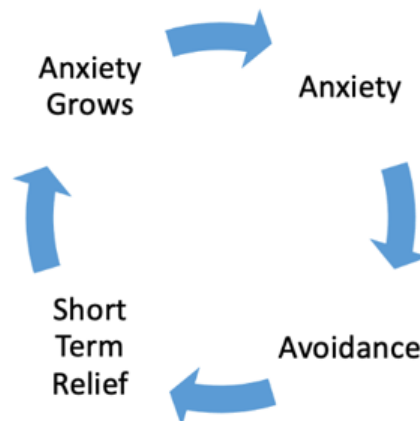
# Anxiety Exposure: General Guidelines for Parents

---

## What is the Anxiety / Avoidance Cycle?

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a diverse group of interventions targeted at the three primary dimensions of anxiety: distorted thoughts about the likelihood of harm, behavioral avoidance of potentially harmful situations, and physiologic symptoms in the body. The primary treatment ingredient for anxiety in CBT is exposure.

- **Avoidance** of feared objects/situations may provide your child with short-term relief but will likely increase their anxiety ultimately.
- **Exposure** has been demonstrated to reduce anxiety and involves exposing your child to the feared objects/situations until they stop avoiding them.
- Avoidance is replaced with healthy coping strategies.



## How do I practice exposure with my child?

- Create a “fear hierarchy” where your child ranks objects/situations from the least scary to the scariest (see page 2 for an example). The goal is to work through the hierarchy one step at a time. During an exposure, your

child should remain with that object or in that situation until their anxiety goes away.

- Start with the least scary objects/situations first so that your child will not be overwhelmed and can feel successful. Once your child feels confident with the object or in the situation, they are ready to face a tougher fear.
- Exposure practice can be difficult, so allow your child to earn a reward for practicing bravery. Examples of rewards could include special treats like candy, granting special privileges, and/or providing special time with a parent/caregiver.
- Ask for help from a mental health professional with experience treating anxiety to help guide you through exposure-based therapy.

### **Why should I practice exposure therapy with my child?**

The best way to help your child defeat their anxiety is to teach them to face it directly through exposure. Avoiding the objects or situations that cause anxiety in your child will feed into the anxiety and will likely result in greater levels of anxiety over time.

### **Fear Hierarchy Template**

<b>Objects/Situations</b>	<b>Anxiety Rating</b>

## How do I fill out the Fear Hierarchy Template?

### List of activities/exposure exercises:

List objects/situations above starting with those that bring about the most anxiety for your child, followed by those that bring less anxiety.

### Anxiety Ratings:

Rate the activities/situations using the following guidelines:

- **0:** No anxiety at all; completely calm
- **3:** Some anxiety, but manageable
- **5:** Getting tough; wouldn't want to have it all the time
- **7-8:** Severe anxiety that interferes with your child's daily life
- **10:** Worst anxiety your child has ever felt

Content adapted from: <https://medicine.umich.edu/sites/default/files/content/downloads/Exposure-and-Desensitization.pdf>

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Author: Blake Lancaster, PhD, LP, Hannah L. Ham, PhD, LP  
Reviewers: Julie Wojtaszek, MHSA, MS, TLLP

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised: 11/2022