

Anxiety Exposure: General Guidelines for Teens

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 under 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?

- Create a “fear hierarchy” where you rank 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.

- Start with the least scary objects/situations first so that you won't feel overwhelmed. Once you feel confident with the object or in the situation, you are ready to face a tougher fear.
- Exposure practice can be difficult, so reward yourself for practicing bravery. Examples of rewards could include special treats like candy or extra time with friends or family members.
- Ask for help from your parents or from a mental health professional with experience treating anxiety to help guide you through exposure-based therapy.

Why should I practice exposure therapy?

The best way to defeat your anxiety is to face it directly through exposure. Avoiding the objects or situations that cause anxiety will likely result in more anxiety over time.

Fear Hierarchy Template

Objects/Situations	Anxiety Rating

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 you, 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 daily life
- **10:** Worst anxiety you have ever felt

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

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