

# Exposure and Habituation for Specific Phobias

**in Low Intensity CBT**

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### **Acknowledgement:**

This booklet is based on the material included within 'Reach Out: National Programme Educator Materials to Support the Delivery of Training for Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners Delivering Low Intensity Interventions'.

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**Image above:** Clinical Training (CEDAR) at the University of Exeter's Streatham Campus. **Image right:** The Sir Henry Wellcome Building for Mood Disorders Research at the University of Exeter.

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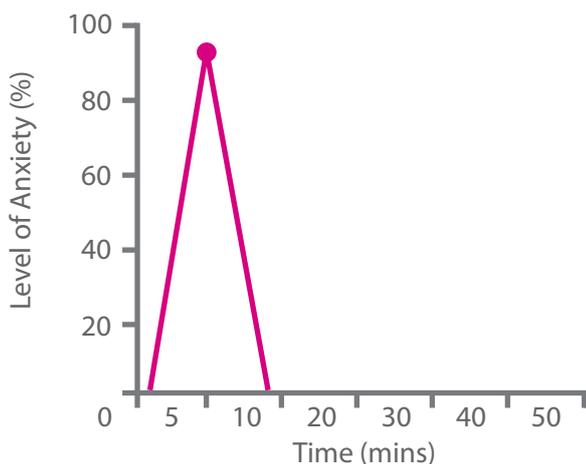


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# Part 1

## How does Exposure and Habituation work?

**Exposure and habituation is an evidence based treatment commonly used when you are avoiding something that causes fear. It works by putting you in charge of confronting the things that you are avoiding as a result if your fear, in a guided and supported way. It is done by building up to facing your fears in a graded way that feels manageable. Exposure and habituation has worked for many people to overcome their difficulties.**



### The Vicious Circle of Avoidance and Anxiety

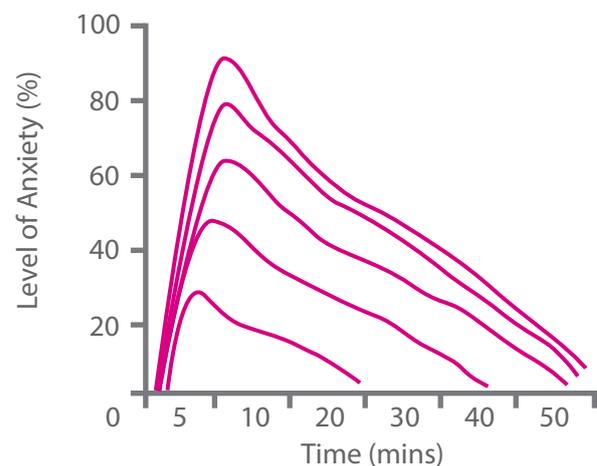
When we feel afraid we may as a result avoid the situation, memory or specific object that makes us fearful. When you do this your anxiety comes down quite quickly. In the short term this provides some relief from the unpleasant symptoms experienced and may encourage you to avoid the fearful event again in the future.

However as you continue to avoid the fearful event a pattern of avoidance is created and you will feel just as anxious the next time you are faced with it. This will lead to a vicious circle of avoidance and anxiety.

### Breaking the Vicious Circle through Habituation

Exposure therapy works by breaking into this vicious cycle. This is done by gradually exposing yourself to the fearful thing without avoiding or escaping from it. You will do this for as long as it takes until your anxiety symptoms naturally reduce by at least 50% on their own. This is called 'habituation'.

As your anxiety symptoms naturally reduce you will learn that the fearful event is not what is causing you anxiety. This will help to break the vicious cycle.



### Richard's Physical Symptoms:

Heart racing  
Shaking  
Butterflies  
Shortness of breath

### Richard's Behaviours:

Avoided going to the dentist for 12 years  
Takes extra care with brushing his teeth and flossing  
Seeks reassurance from friends and family members  
Makes his wife take their children to the dentist  
Avoids watching any TV or films with dentists in

### Altered Thinking:

"I won't cope if I need treatment"  
"I cannot stand the smell of the dentists office"  
"What if he needs to use the drill"  
"I won't be able to get past the waiting room"



**This example shows how Richard's specific phobia of the dentist is impacting on what he does, how he feels physically and his thoughts.**

His avoidance gives him short term temporary relief from his anxiety; but in the longer term maintains his difficulties and keeps him feeling anxious and avoiding. He has developed toothache so his wife made him book an appointment with the local dental practice. Richard used exposure and habituation to overcome his difficulties, which was supported by a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) at his local talking therapy service. He had self referred to the service after seeing a card in the waiting room of the dentists.

# Part 2

## Planning to use Exposure and Habituation: The Four Conditions to follow

***Although using exposure and habituation for your specific phobia is personally challenging, the good thing is that following four simple conditions makes it effective. Follow these steps to plan your own exposure and habituation plan to overcome your phobia, ensuring it meets these conditions.***

### Condition 1: Graded

Use the hierarchy on worksheet A to help you to identify what you are currently fearful of and what you are avoiding. Put the things that you find most fearful at the top and work downwards adding things that are medium difficulty and easier things too. You should not grade things on your hierarchy by the length of time you will expose yourself to them. This is because in exposure and habituation, you need to stay in the situation until your anxiety drops by at least 50% from where it is at the start of the exercise and we do not know how long this will take from person to person. If you graded your exposure activities by time, you could end up stopping the exercise before habituation can take place, which would mean the treatment was not effective. You don't want to face your phobia, feel anxious and not benefit from the treatment!

Once you have created your hierarchy, select the step that causes you some anxiety, but one you feel you could manage. For something to be a useful exposure exercise for your specific phobia, it should give you enough symptoms of anxiety to enable habituation to take place and for you to feel your anxiety level drop by at least half during the exercise. A useful suggestion is that it needs to give you at least 50-60% anxiety to use in an exposure exercise. That will help to guide you to know what to choose first.

### Condition 2: Prolonged

Once you have created your hierarchy, select your first step and write this in the exercise section on worksheet B. Then plan a suitable time to undertake the exposure exercise. Remember to plan to stay exposed to the step on your hierarchy for as long as it takes for your anxiety to drop by 50% from the start of the exercise. Unfortunately no one knows exactly how long it will take for your body to use up the adrenalin and your symptoms reduce, as this varies from person to person. It may be helpful to put aside 1-2 hours for your exercises initially. Once you have decided when you will do your exposure exercise, fill in the date and time you plan to do it.

When you are beginning to prepare to do your exposure exercise, just before the planned start time, fill in the 'Before Exercise' rating on worksheet B to indicate how much anxiety you are experiencing before you do it. Use the rating scale at the bottom where 0% = no anxiety and 100% = where you are experiencing the worst level of panic.

Just as you start your exposure at the planned time, then re-rate your anxiety again using the 'Start of the Exercise' rating column. This is the figure you will use to know when to stop the exposure exercise when this level has dropped by 50%. Once you have completed the exercise, put your end of exercise anxiety rating on the form and see how long it took for your anxiety to drop by 50% from the time at the start of the exercise.



# Remember the four conditions:

## Condition 1: Graded

List things in your exposure hierarchy that give you at least 50-60% anxiety from the easier things up to more difficult things. Remember not to grade an exercise by time. When you have been repeating an exercise and it no longer gives you at least 40% anxiety at the start of the exercise, you are then ready to move up to the next item on your exposure hierarchy.

## Condition 2: Prolonged

Stay in the exposure exercise situation, without using distraction until your anxiety drops by 50% from the start of the exercise. So for example if you were 80% anxious, you would stay in the situation until your anxiety drops to 40%. You would then repeat the exercise until it no longer gets above 40% at the start of the exercise.

## Condition 3: Repeated

Expose yourself to each step on the hierarchy at a time. You should repeat each step until the exercise no longer makes you feel anxious, say if it no longer goes above 40% anxiety at the start of the exercise. Then it is time to move up to the next exercise on your hierarchy ladder. On average you should aim to do exposure treatment 4-5 times per week (these may be different exercises depending on your ratings).

## Condition 4: Without Distraction

Try to remove things from your hierarchy that reduce your anxiety artificially or distract you from how you are feeling during your exposure exercises. Whilst these may seem like they give temporary relief from feeling anxious, they are keeping you stuck in that vicious circle.

Fill in the time you did the exercise over in the 'Duration' box on the worksheet. This helps you and your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner see how long it took for you to habituate.

## Condition 3: Repeated

You should continue exposing yourself to the same step of the hierarchy until you notice that your anxiety score at the start of the exercise is no longer going up quickly and feels that it is now at a manageable level for you to consider moving onto the next exercise. Try to repeat the exercise at each step as many times as you can within each week to get the full benefit. The number of times you can do it however can be affected by the type and demands of the exposure exercise, what your phobia is and other competing demands in your life. The more you do it, the more likely you are to feel the benefits, so do the best you can to make time to carry out exercises on average 4-5 times per week. If the exercise is no longer causing you more than 30-40% anxiety at the start of the exercise, then it may be time to move to the next step on your hierarchy. Your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner or other health professional can also advise you when it is a good time to move up the hierarchy.

## Condition 4: Without Distraction

When we feel anxious we sometimes do things to make us feel better or safer; or we may ask others for support to reduce our anxiety. Whilst this may reduce your anxiety level in the short term, relying on these things is unhelpful in the longer term and will not enable habituation to take place in your exposure treatment. To make exposure and habituation to work effectively, you need to ensure that you do not use things that may distract you from feeling your anxiety or make you feel better during the exercise. To habituate naturally to the phobic object or activity you need to do the exercise and remain with the anxiety until it naturally reduces by 50%. It can be hard to drop these things straight away

though. Sometimes people need to rely on these things to get started with exposure. This is OK, however at some step in your hierarchy you should put on the list doing the activities without them. For example, if you had a phobia of the dentist and you initially could not manage to go to visit the dentist and sitting in the waiting room without your partner with you, you may have this as an easier activity as long as it still gives you enough anxiety to make a good exercise. Further up your hierarchy however you should have visiting the dentist and sitting in the waiting room alone. At times

this is a good way to construct the steps within your hierarchy. Your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner will be keeping an eye out for anything like this you have and will be able to advise you how to drop them. You should also ensure that during the exercise you do not distract yourself from your feelings of anxiety in any other way and that if someone is with you as part of your plan on an exercise that you do not distract yourself from how you are feeling by having a conversation with them, or seeking their reassurance.

## Remember:

Keeping records are essential to schedule activities. They also help you and your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner if you are seeing one, to review your progress and help you problem solve any difficulties.



# Part 3

## Exposure Hierarchy Worksheet A

Below Write Each Step in Your Hierarchy	Anxiety Rating (0-100%)
<p><b>Most difficult...</b></p>          <p><b>Medium difficulty...</b></p>          <p><b>Easiest...</b></p>	

# Part 4

# Exposure Exercise Rating Sheet

## Worksheet B

Date and Time	Duration	Exercise	Rating of Anxiety Level			Comments
			Before Exercise	Start of Exercise	End of Exercise	



# Part 5

## Recovery Story of Craig

*Craig's story is about someone who used exposure therapy for his specific phobia of spiders with the support of his Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP). Exposure is a technique that breaks the cycle of avoidance and anxiety by slowly confronting the feared object in a graded way until anxiety falls.*

Craig is 31 years old and works as a Primary School Teacher, a job he really loves. He was happy in his relationship with his partner Zoe and was due to marry later in the year, going on honeymoon to Australia. Craig and Zoe were excited about this, but Craig also had a specific phobia of spiders, which was making him increasingly more anxious as the wedding got closer.

Living in the UK he had managed to deal with his spider phobia by avoiding situations and

places where he may come across a spider. He would always be on the look-out for spiders, and on the odd occasion he would come across one would call Zoe to deal with it. If she was not home he would shut the door to the room and block up the gap under the door with towels until Zoe returned home.

Craig knew that continually asking Zoe for help with spiders would not be an option in Australia and was concerned as he knew spiders could be dangerous



in Australia which made him more anxious decided to seek help. He noted that he was getting increasing more anxious about the honeymoon which was affecting his relationship and he was getting more irritable at work.

Craig and his PWP then collaboratively discussed the exposure treatment stages and how to take this forward to work on his goals. The PWP and Craig looked together at exposure and habituation and his PWP explained the four necessary conditions.

Although Craig was highly anxious about the thought of facing his fear of spiders like this, he knew it had to be done and he was reassured when the PWP discussed the good evidence base supporting Exposure and that he would be in control of the treatment with the support of his PWP.

To ensure that the treatment was **graded**, the PWP used the **Exposure Hierarchy (Worksheet A)** to start to help Craig create a graded list of anxiety provoking situations arising from his spider phobia from the easiest to the most difficult. Initially Craig found this difficult to do, but found it helpful when his PWP suggested that he may want to try to think about what causes him the most and least fear first and then to think about something in the middle. Once he started in this way he began to find the task of grading his fear much easier and began moving steps up and down the hierarchy as he thought about them. He also found the PWP's advice that he could consider varying specific tasks by things such as distance from the spider, or size of spider etc. to vary levels of fear helpful.

## With the aid of his Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner Craig decided on the following goals:

### Craig's Goals

#### Goal number 1

*To be in the same room as a spider*

**Today's date:** *24th November*

I can do this now (circle a number):

0      1      2      3      4      5      6  
Not at all      Occasionally      Often      Anytime

#### Goal number 2

*To be able to hold a spider in my hand*

**Today's date:** *24th November*

I can do this now (circle a number):

0      1      2      3      4      5      6  
Not at all      Occasionally      Often      Anytime

# Craig's Exposure Hierarchy

## Worksheet A

Below Write Each Step in Your Hierarchy	Anxiety Rating (0-100%)
<p><b>Most difficult...</b></p> <p>To hold a spider in my hand</p> <p>To be in a different room to a spider with the door open</p>	<p>95%</p> <p>65%</p>
<p><b>Medium difficulty...</b></p> <p>To be in the same room as a real spider in a jar</p> <p>To watch a video of a spider moving</p>	<p>65%</p> <p>60%</p>
<p><b>Easiest...</b></p> <p>To look at a picture of a small spider</p>	<p>30%</p>

Once Craig understood how to grade the steps in his hierarchy he was encouraged by his PWP to complete the hierarchy in his own time. Within the session they moved onto planning some exposure tasks on the **Exposure Rating Sheet (Worksheet B)**. To make sure that the exposure was **graded** he was encouraged to select a task on his hierarchy that caused him some fear but one that did not feel it was so overwhelming that he could not manage it. Craig decided to start from second thing on his hierarchy, 'To watch a video of a spider moving', because looking at a picture of a small spider did not give him enough initial anxiety to meet the graded condition. With his PWP they problem solved how to get hold of such a video, however this was very easy to do as it was found that there were many good examples to use on 'You Tube'. Craig was then encouraged to consider when he would be best able to commit the time to undertake this task and wrote this in the Date and Time column of the **Exposure Rating Sheet (Worksheet B)**.

In consultation with his PWP it was decided that a good time to start would be that evening as Zoe was working late and Craig planned to start at 7.30pm. To make sure that the exposure was **repeated** Craig planned to complete the first step several times that week and discussed with his PWP about how many times to repeat this step before moving up the hierarchy. Craig did not put in the duration of the exposure exercise **until afterwards** as he did not know how long it would take for his anxiety to **reduce by 50%** while being in the presence of the feared object (video clip of a moving spider) so he agreed to complete this part of the worksheet after each exercise to ensure it was **prolonged**. Craig also discussed with his PWP the need for him to carry out each exposure session **without distraction** and to rate his anxiety level before, during and after the exercise using the scale that was on the worksheet and to make any comments that he felt were necessary. He would use this to monitor how the exposure was going and so that this could be discussed in his next session with his PWP.

After some obvious fear about undertaking the exposure exercises Craig found that the first week actually went quite well. So well in fact that by the

**Graded**  
**Repeated**  
**Prolonged**  
**Without Distraction**

Sunday he had decided to step up to the next step himself. Doing this he noticed a lot of the fear that had gone had returned, but he was well prepared for this and keen to get on with it.

At his next telephone appointment Craig discussed how he was getting on with his PWP. He was very supportive and motivated Craig just to keep going as he had been. Over the next few weeks Craig carried on doing the exercises and made good progress. It wasn't always easy, but once he had moved up a few steps he noticed that, although each step bought its own fear, in a weird sort of way it seemed to get easier. He was very pleased that he no longer seemed to be on the lookout for spiders and that once again he was able to feel more relaxed in his home and work life.

Later that year Zoe and Craig got married and thoroughly enjoyed their honeymoon in Australia, visiting the Sydney Opera House and snorkelling the great barrier reef. Craig felt so relaxed during his holiday that he sent his PWP a thank you postcard from Australia. It had a picture of a big spider on the front!

# Craig's Exposure Exercise Rating Sheet

## Worksheet B

Date and Time	Duration	Exercise	Rating of Anxiety Level			Comments
			Before Exercise	Start of Exercise	End of Exercise	
Tue 7.30am	65 mins	To watch a video of a spider moving	55%	85%	40%	Terrifying but I did it!
Wed 7.30am	60 mins	To watch a video of a spider moving	45%	85%	30%	Still horrible but I did it!
Fri 4.00pm	40 mins	To watch a video of a spider moving	40%	40%	20%	Not as bad this time 😊
Sat 2.45pm	25 mins	To watch a video of a spider moving	15%	15%	5%	Felt fine, and want to do it all but will do one last time to check all well before moving to the next step
Sun 11.00am	60 mins	To be in the same room as a real spider in a jar	65%	85%	40%	Felt horrible again, to begin with but I was expecting this and it got better

**No Anxiety**  
0%

**Mild Anxiety**  
25%

**Moderate Anxiety**  
50%

**Severe Anxiety**  
75%

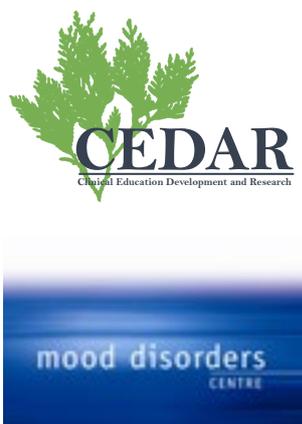
**Panic**  
100%



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