

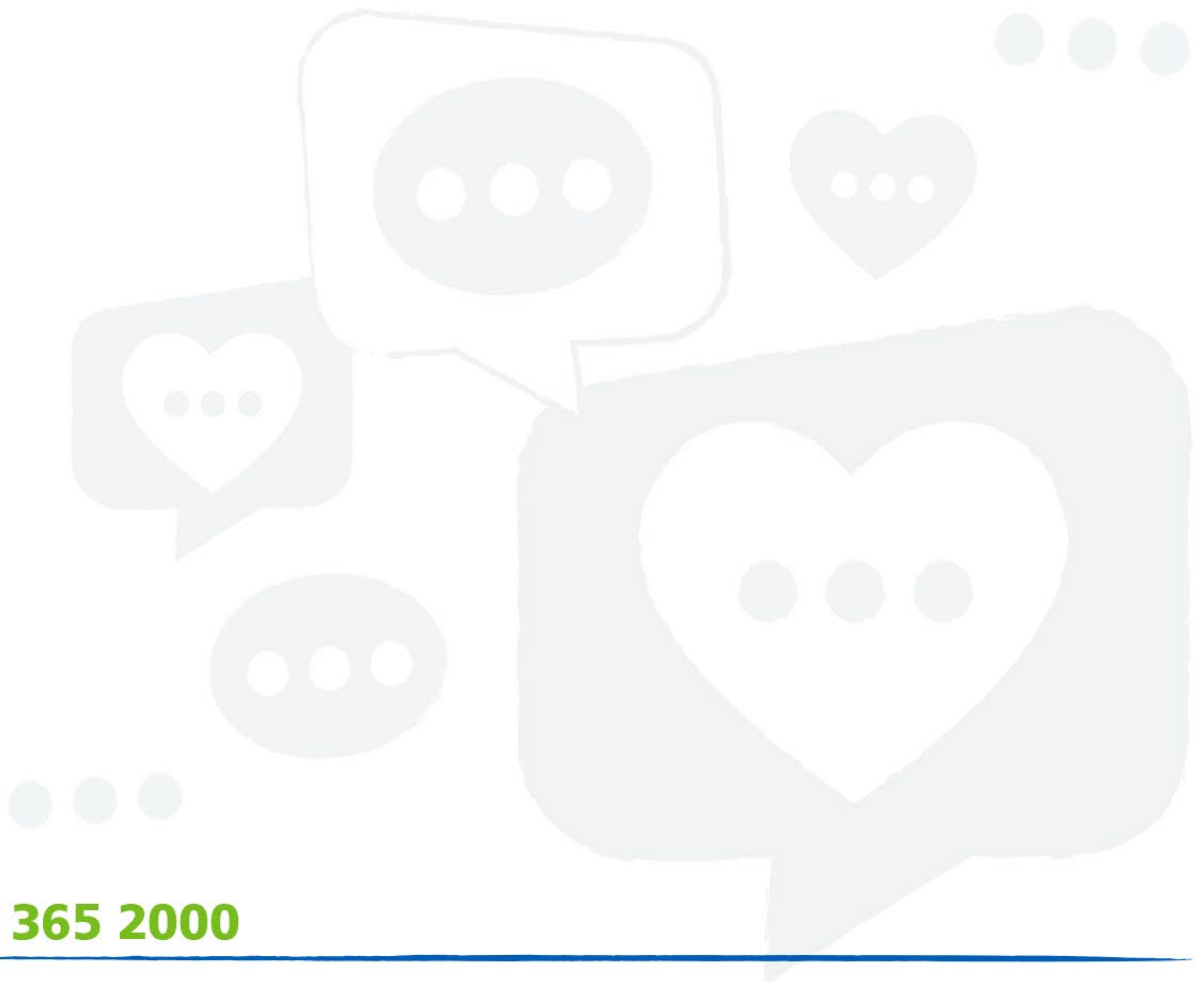


Talking Therapies  
**Workbook...**

**Workbook 10**

# Phobias

A self-help guide



 **0300 365 2000**

# Contents of this booklet

❑ What is a phobia?.....	3
❑ Why do we experience phobias?.....	4
❑ What is anxiety?.....	5
❑ The vicious cycle of avoidance.....	6
❑ What are safety behaviours?.....	9
❑ Facing your fears.....	11
❑ Graded exposure.....	13
❑ My exposure diary.....	17
❑ Notes.....	18
❑ Further resources.....	19
❑ Useful contacts.....	20



As you work through the booklet, feel free to make notes on the 'Notes' page at the back

# What is a phobia?

**A phobia is when you have a really strong and lasting fear of something specific, like certain animals, heights, crowds, certain foods, or needles.**

When you encounter what scares you, it can make you feel a lot more anxious or even panicked about the idea of facing your fear. This might make you do your best to completely avoid situations that can cause you distress.

Sometimes, we don't run into our fears very often, so it's easy to steer clear of them. But there are times when our fears are a regular part of our daily life, and that can make us anxious a lot of the time.



At other times you might get anxious just thinking about whatever it is you're afraid of.

Even though we know our fears don't always make logical sense, it can feel like there's nothing we can do about them, and we struggle to handle them.

This workbook is about helping you understand how fear and avoiding what we're scared of can keep those fears going strong.

We're here to help you break the cycle of anxiety and avoiding things in a way that works for you. The goal is to help you take charge of your fears so they don't have as much control over your life.

# Why do we experience phobias?

## Frightening experiences

**In some cases, phobias may stem from a specific experience that may have been traumatic or had a negative meaning attached to it.**

A common example is a child being confronted with a large dog that seems very frightening that may shock or surprise them. This could lead to a phobia as an adult. However, not everyone develops phobias from frightening experiences such as these. Positive experiences with dogs after that event may prevent a phobia from developing.



## Learning fears from others

**For others, it could be due to other people's perception of that object or situation.**

For example, a fear of heights is a common phobia, and we may have spent a lot of time with someone who 'taught' us to be afraid without realising it.

In many instances the phobia may not have stemmed from either a frightening or 'learnt' experience and we may have no recollection of how we acquired it. It doesn't matter whether we can remember the cause or not, the important thing is that we focus on the present and how to tackle our fears. We don't need to know the cause of the phobia to recover from it.

### Reflect

Can you think of anything that may have triggered your phobia in the first instance?

# What is anxiety?

Anxiety occurs when we perceive a situation or object as threatening and we don't feel we have the skills we need to cope with it.

## The Anxiety Equation:

$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{High estimation of danger}}{\text{Low estimation of coping abilities}}$$

If something causes us to feel afraid or scared, then this can induce physical symptoms known as the **'fight or flight' response**.

This is a response that has evolved to protect us from danger and includes symptoms such as increased heart rate, feeling hot and feeling a surge of adrenaline, among others. These physical symptoms occur to help us either run away from danger or to prepare to fight it.

The **'fight or flight' response** is helpful if we are faced with real danger but for most of us our daily lives do not present us with life-threatening situations.

When we are faced with any situation that we don't feel prepared to deal with, the **'fight or flight' response** can become activated. If the situation is not physically threatening (e.g., giving a presentation to a large group of people) this response is not helpful for coping with the situation, and can actually be quite frightening.



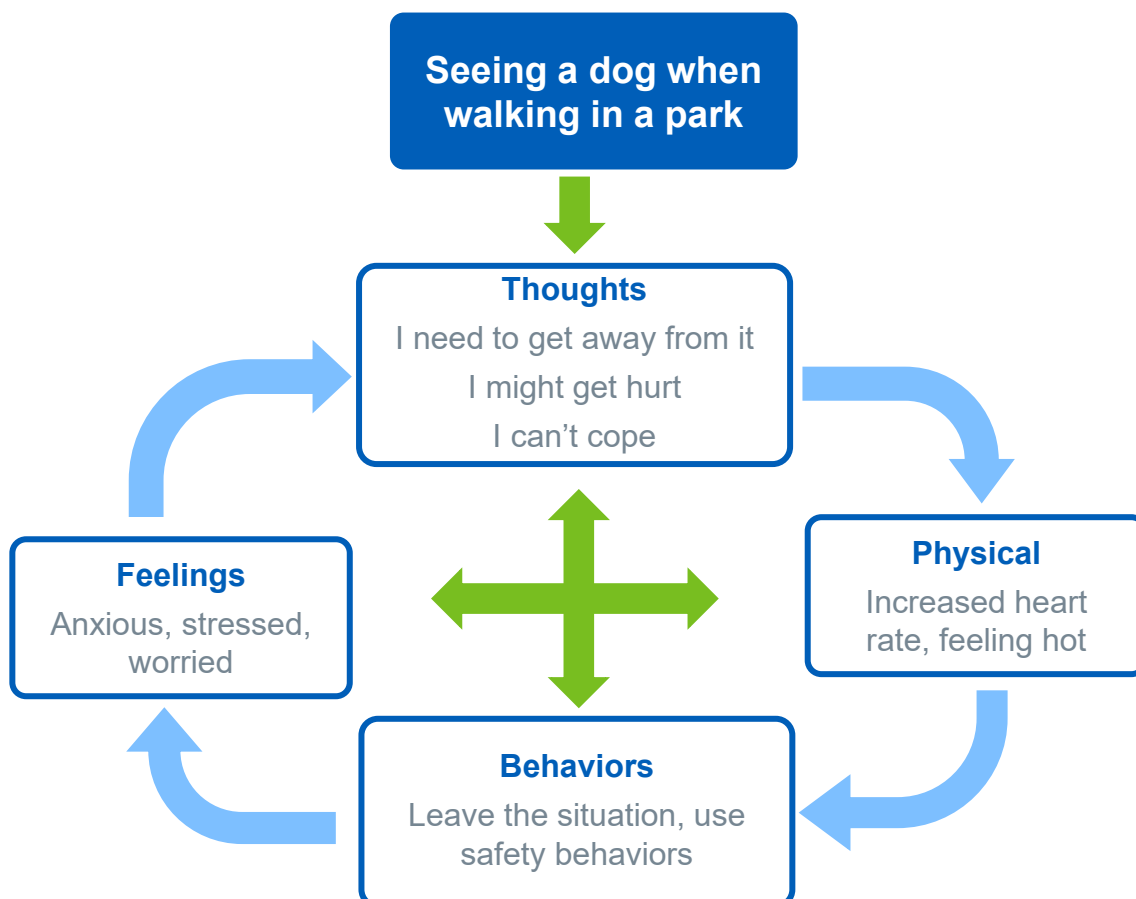
# The vicious cycle of avoidance

If we have a phobia that causes us to feel anxiety or fear, it's understandable that we will try to avoid it. In the short term, avoidance gives us relief from the unpleasant emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety. This is called **negative reinforcement**.

However, if we continue to avoid or leave situations that cause us to feel anxious, we will feel just as scared next time we are faced with the same situation, resulting in a vicious cycle of anxiety and avoidance.

By leaving or avoiding a situation that causes anxiety, we never learn whether we can cope with it and whether our fears about what might actually happen come true.

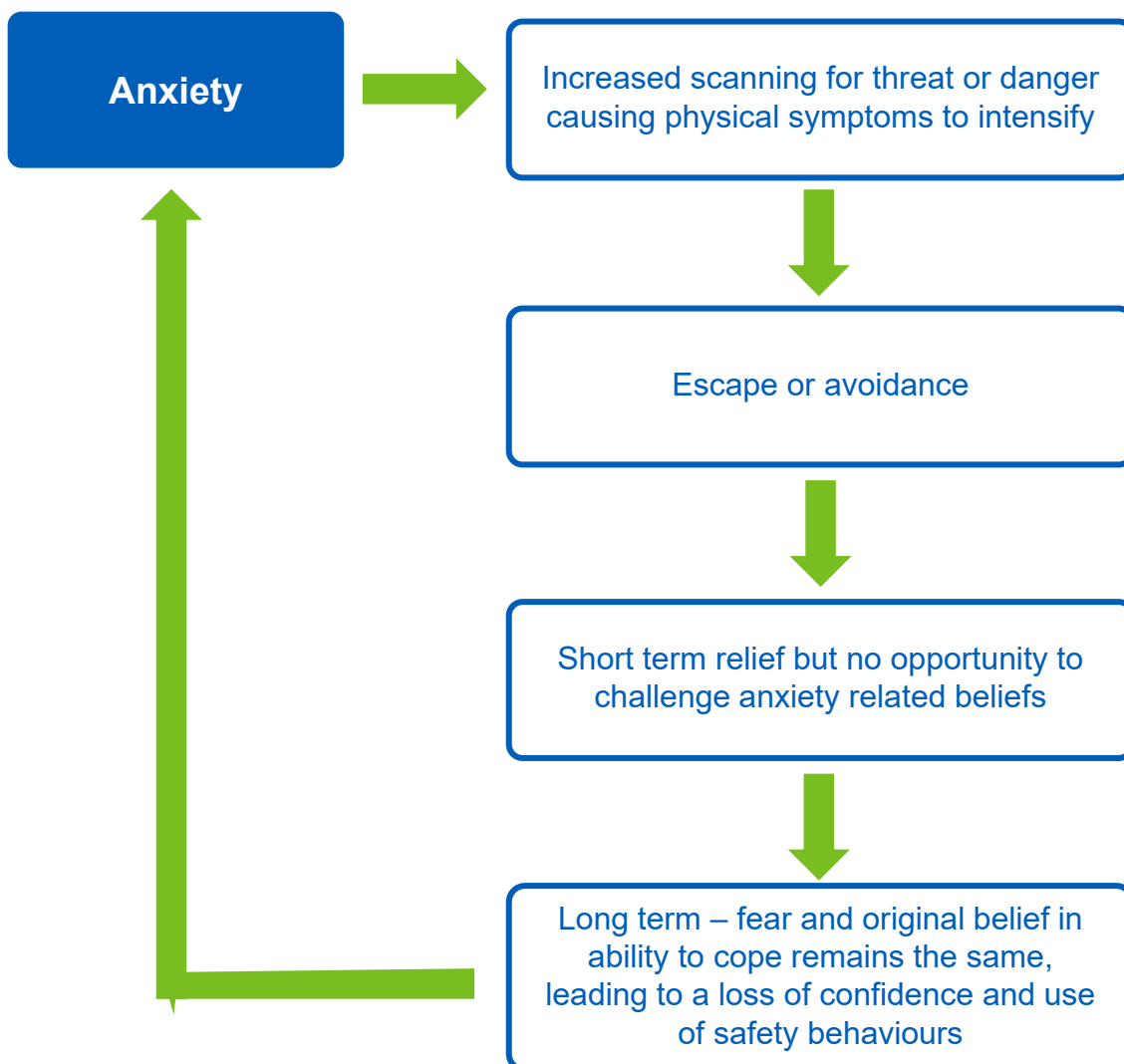
Typically, our phobia will result in specific thoughts or worries, emotions, physical symptoms and behaviours that we do to try and manage our fear. The example below is of someone with a phobia of dogs. This illustrates how a phobia can affect us in these different areas and how this can lead to a cycle of avoidance.



# The problem with avoidance

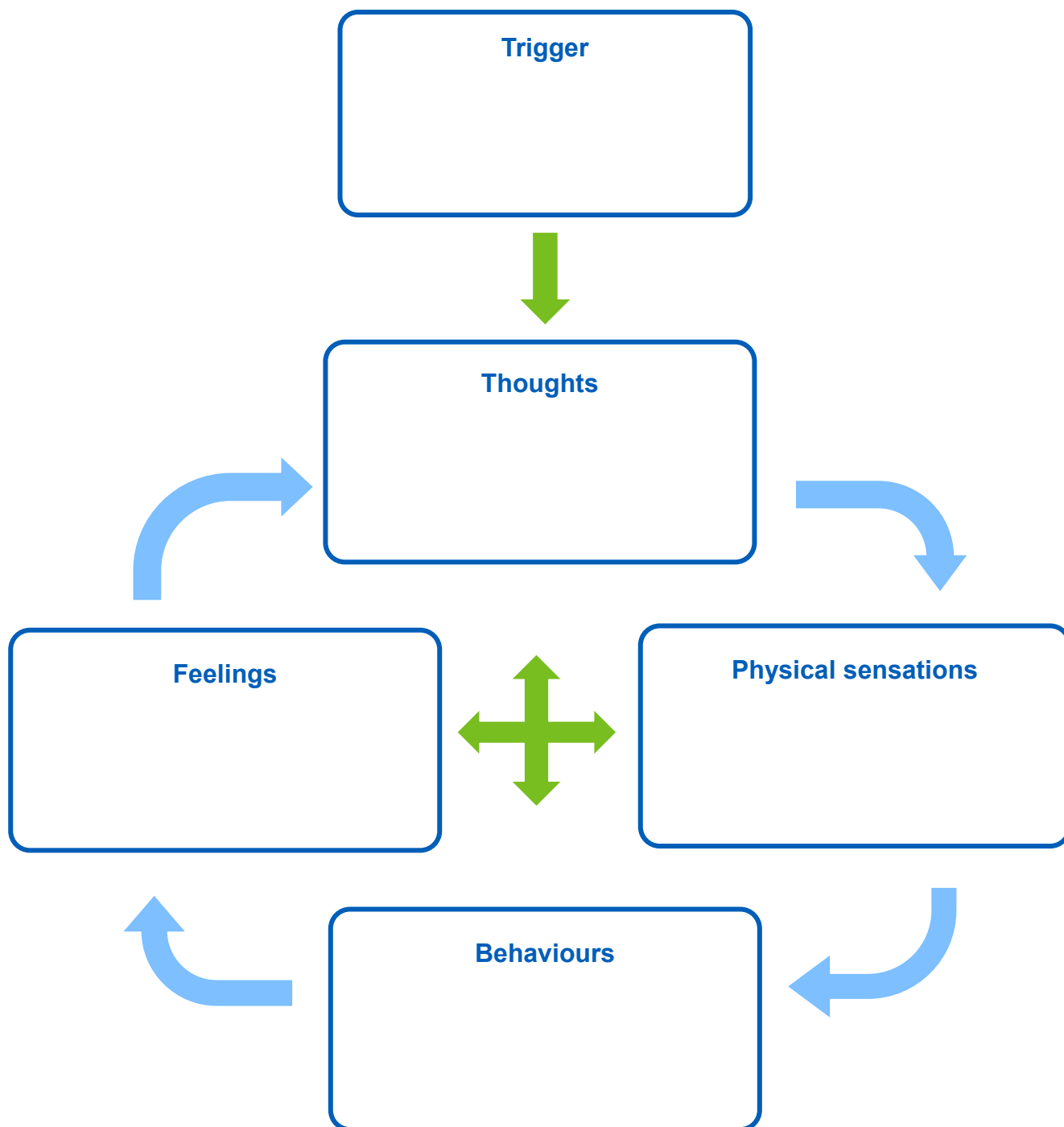
In the example on page 6, each time the person is faced with something related to dogs, the same cycle will occur, leading to continued avoidance or continued use of safety behaviours (see page 9 for more information on safety behaviours).

This means that their fear remains intact and their belief in their ability to cope doesn't increase and instead these behaviours can maintain anxiety as illustrated below.



# My vicious cycle of avoidance

Complete the below diagram to explore how your phobia impacts you:





# What are safety behaviours?

Avoidance can come in many forms. Sometimes we do not escape or avoid the situation entirely but instead we start to adopt behaviours that help us to feel safer in that situation. These are called safety behaviours.

## Examples

- ❑ Only **going to certain places** with someone you feel comfortable with
- ❑ **Over preparing** or over planning to try and make the situation more predictable
- ❑ Carrying **anti-anxiety medication** just in case you become anxious
- ❑ **Holding onto something** to prevent yourself from collapsing when you become anxious e.g. a chair
- ❑ Opening windows to **make sure you get enough air**
- ❑ Always **being close to an exit** e.g. sit nearest the door on a train
- ❑ **Smoking a cigarette** before entering an anxiety provoking situation
- ❑ Seeking **reassurance** or asking others to make decisions for you
- ❑ **Distracting yourself** e.g. listening to music or playing on your phone
- ❑ Using **drugs or alcohol**

Like avoidance, **safety behaviours can appear helpful in the short term**. However, they also maintain our anxiety. This is because we believe that the reason we can get by is because of the safety behaviour. We miss out on the opportunity to learn that there was no threat or that we can cope on our own if faced with a challenge.

We **start to depend on safety behaviours** and, if for any reason we are unable to use them, this may pose a significant problem for us. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and negative thoughts such as “I’m pathetic” or “I should be able to cope with this – what’s wrong with me?”.

This creates a **vicious cycle** that leads to us perceiving the world around us as being threatening and ourselves as being unable to cope, resulting in more avoidance or safety behaviours.

# Activity

Write down a list of situations that you avoid and any safety behaviours that you use because of your phobia.

Avoidance and safety behaviours	
What situations do you avoid because of your phobia?	
What safety behaviours do you use?	

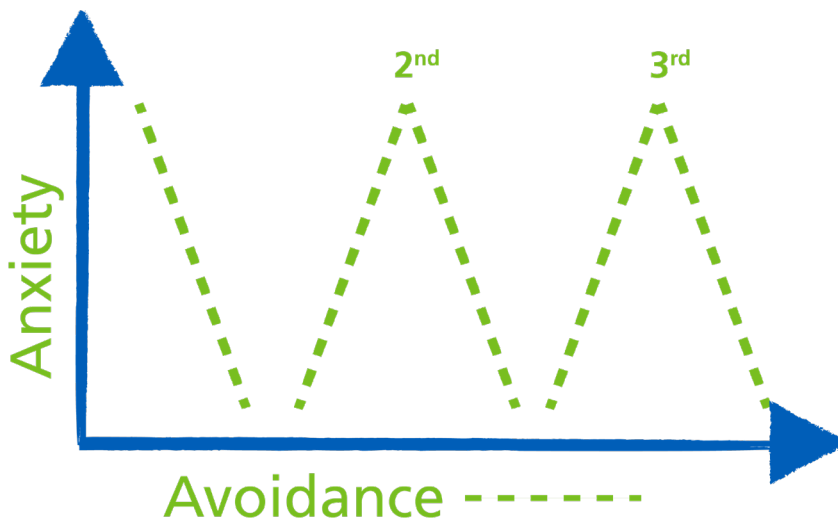
# Facing your fears

## What do you think would happen?

**What would happen to your anxiety if you face a feared situation and stay in it without using any safety behaviours?**

Most people would say that they wouldn't be able to cope, the anxiety would just keep rising until eventually something terrible happens such as passing out or having a heart attack. We know this is in fact not the case.

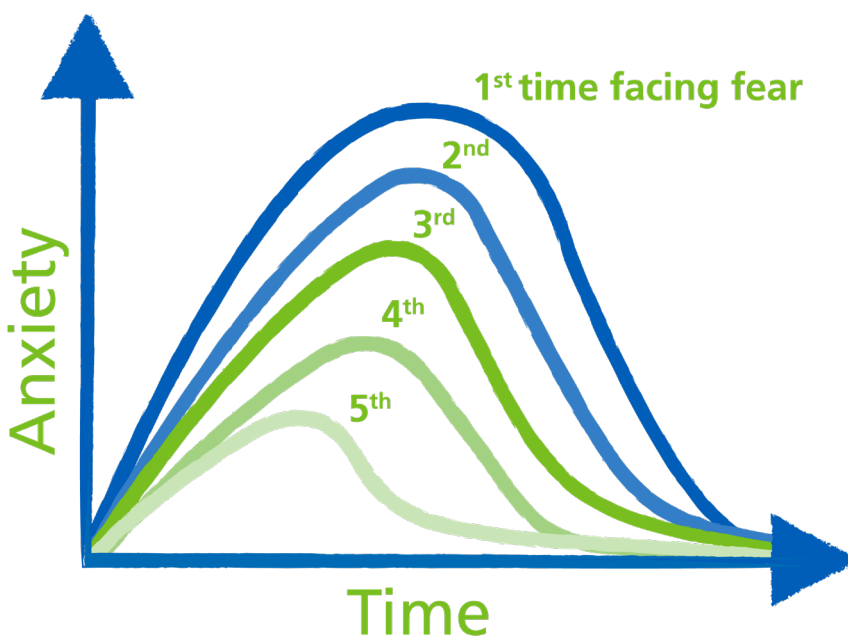
This graph shows what happens when we face an anxiety provoking situation and our response is to leave or use a safety behaviour. Each time we face that same situation our anxiety is equally high the next time round:



# Facing your fears

## What would actually happen?

This graph shows what would actually happen if we were to face an anxiety provoking situation without the support of safety behaviours.



As you can see, anxiety goes up quickly when entering a feared situation, but with time (usually after approximately 20 minutes) will go down again. We also have the opportunity to challenge anxious thoughts and predictions about what happens when we encounter our phobia.

With repeated exposure to the same feared situations, your anxiety will become progressively less severe and more tolerable. This process is known as **'desensitisation'** or **'habituation'**, where the situation is so familiar that it no longer appears threatening. This is very effective for treating phobias.

# Graded exposure

## What is graded exposure?

**Graded exposure is a technique that works by breaking down our feared situations and confronting them gradually.**

Using a graded exposure hierarchy, we start with situations that are less anxiety provoking and work up to more difficult situations. This helps us learn that anxiety levels do come down if we stay in the situation and don't use safety behaviours. See a graded hierarchy example on page 14.

## The four rules of graded exposure

- **Rule 1 – Graded**

Exposure to anxiety provoking situations must be graded in order of least to most anxiety provoking.

- **Rule 2 – Prolonged**

You need to ensure that your exposure to the situation is prolonged. This means that you need to stay in that situation until your anxiety has reduced by at least 50%.

- **Rule 3 – Repeated**

Repeat each exposure activity until your anxiety rating from the start of the exercise has reduced by 50%. Once you have achieved this, you can then move up to the next exercise on your hierarchy.

- **Rule 4 – Without distraction**

It is important when using this technique to be aware of any safety behaviours that you are doing, or anything that could distract you from the anxiety. It's important to truly feel the anxiety in order to learn that your anxiety levels will reduce. If it feels too difficult to drop safety behaviours initially then you could start off by including them on the lower levels of your hierarchy and gradually removing them within your hierarchy.

# Graded exposure: step by step

- **Step 1 – Plan your hierarchy**

Make a list of situations you avoid, then rate how anxious or uncomfortable those situations make you feel on a scale of 0-100 (with 100 being maximum anxiety).

Add these to the **graded hierarchy template on page 15** to make your graded hierarchy.

Start with the easiest or least anxiety provoking situations at the bottom, working up to the most anxiety provoking at the top.

- **Step 2 – Begin graded exposure**

The next step is to start deliberately exposing yourself to the situations that you are avoiding.

Start with the easiest situation and keep repeating the same step until your anxiety has at least improved by 50%.

Make sure you follow the **four rules of graded exposure from page 12**.

- **Step 3 – Complete an exposure diary**

Whilst completing your graded exposure, use **the exposure diary on page 16** to record how you find it.

- **Step 4 – Review and continue**

Keep working up the graded hierarchy recording your progress as you go.



Exposing yourself to the phobia will be very anxiety provoking initially, but your practitioner will support you with the strategies throughout and over time your anxiety will start to reduce if you stick to the four conditions on page 12.

# Graded hierarchy example

See below an example of a graded hierarchy for anxiety when in crowded places.

Situations	Anxiety (0-100)
Stroking a dog	100
Walking in a park with lots of dogs around at a busy time of day for dog walkers alone	95
Walking in a park with lots of dogs around at a quiet time of day for dog walkers alone	90
Walking in a park with lots of dogs around at a busy time of day for dog walkers with a friend/partner/family member	80
Walking in a park with dogs with a friend at a quiet time of day	75
Watching videos of dogs	65
Looking at cartoon images of dogs	55
Writing down the word dog	50

## Reflect

Why not try completing a graded hierarchy for your phobia on page 15. Use the example for guidance. Your psychological wellbeing practitioner will review this with you before you start completing your exposure tasks.

# My graded hierarchy

Fill in the blank graded hierarchy below.

Situations	Anxiety (0-100)



# My exposure diary

Fill in this exposure diary before and after you have placed yourself in an anxiety provoking situation. This can help you track your progress and notice improvements over time.

Date & Time	Duration (minutes)	Situation	Anxiety Rating (0-100)			Comments
			Before the exposure	At the start of the exposure	End of the exposure	

# Notes

A series of 20 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

# Further resources



## Workbooks

**Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI)** - <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/>

A range of detailed resources and PDF workbooks available to download for free focusing on a range of depression and anxiety related difficulties

**Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS** – <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

Self-help guides free to download by PDF and print on a range of difficulties including anxiety and depression

## Smartphone apps (found on Apple and Google Play store)

**WRAP** – Wellness recovery action app

**Mood Tools** – Depression aid

**Fear Tools** – Anxiety kit

**Insight Timer** – meditation app

## Websites

**Mind** – <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

**Mental Health Foundation** - <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>

**NHS** - <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

# Useful contacts...



## Talking Therapies:

**0300 365 2000**

(Open 8am to 8pm Monday to Thursday  
8am to 5pm Friday)

Email:

[talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk](mailto:talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk)

## Other contacts:

Berkshire Crisis Team:

**0800 129 9999**

(24 hours, specialist service for  
immediate mental health crisis)

Samaritans:

**116 123**

(24 hours, confidential listening service)

NHS Direct / out of hours:

**111**

(24 hours, physical and mental  
health concerns)

**In an emergency always call 999**

