

Fear Hierarchy

What is Fear Hierarchy?

When we are terrified of something, our instinct is to avoid it completely. However, avoidance actually feeds anxiety and makes the fear grow stronger over time. The Fear Hierarchy is a powerful cognitive behavioral tool used as a setup for exposure therapy. It is designed to be used as a supplement for gradual exposure, helping you break a massive, overwhelming fear down into smaller, manageable steps, like rungs on a ladder.

Because creating the list is only the first phase, please make sure to read more on exposure therapy basics before attempting to execute your hierarchy. By gradually facing these fears starting from the easiest scenario to the hardest, you systematically desensitize your brain. You prove to yourself through direct experience that you are safe and capable, allowing your anxiety to naturally decrease over time without feeling overwhelmed all at once.

Case Example: "I can never drive on the freeway again"

Emily, developed intense panic attacks about driving on the freeway. She began avoiding it entirely, which severely limited her life and left her feeling defeated, constantly thinking, "I can never drive on the freeway again."

Therapist: It makes complete sense that the thought of jumping right back onto a busy freeway feels impossible right now. But what if we did not start there? What if we built a staircase to get there gradually?

Emily: How would that work? I get anxious just looking at my car right now.

Therapist: That is actually a great place to start. We can rate different driving tasks on a scale from 0 to 100 based on how much anxiety they cause. We start with the easiest task, practice it until the anxiety drops, and then move to the next rung on the ladder. What would be a low-level step for you?

Emily: Maybe just sitting in the driver's seat with the engine off. I would rate that a 30 out of 100.

Therapist: Perfect. And what would be the next step up?

Emily: Driving around my quiet neighborhood. That is probably a 50. Driving on a busy local road might be a 70. And the freeway is a 100.

Therapist: Exactly. We will conquer the 30 until it feels boring, then move to the 50, and work our way up entirely at your pace.

After this back-and-forth exchange, Emily realized she did not have to conquer her biggest fear all at once. By creating a Fear Hierarchy, she gained a structured, predictable roadmap. She practiced sitting in her car until she felt calm, then progressed

to driving in her neighborhood. By systematically moving up her hierarchy, Emily rebuilt her confidence step-by-step and successfully returned to freeway driving.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify your ultimate goal or the specific fear you want to overcome (e.g., speaking in public, going to a crowded grocery store, driving). Write it down:

Step 2. Brainstorm a list of situations related to this fear and rate each one on a scale from 0 to 100 using Subjective Units of Distress (SUDs). Establishing anchor points will allow you to rate the exposures in the hierarchy more accurately:

- 0 = A time you feel completely relaxed.
- 50 = You feel anxious or distressed, but can push through it.
- 100 = The most anxious or distressed you have ever felt.

Try to come up with at least five to ten different scenarios ranging from slightly uncomfortable to terrifying. Use the columns below to write out the situation and its corresponding SUDs rating.

Exposure	SUDs Rating (0 - 100)

Step 3. Order the list from lowest distress to highest distress. This ordered list is your Fear Hierarchy.

Exposure	SUDs Rating (0 - 100)

Step 4. Start at the bottom rung. Engage in the easiest activity and stay in the situation until your anxiety naturally decreases by at least half. Once you completely master a rung and it feels easy, move up to the next step.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **A Setup for Exposure:** Remember that writing this list is just the setup. Make sure to read more on the rules of gradual exposure before attempting to face the items on your hierarchy.
- **Stay in It:** Anxiety will naturally spike when you first face a fear. The key is to stay in the situation until the anxiety peaks and then comes down on its own. If you leave the situation while at the peak of your anxiety, the fear will actually grow.
- **Expect Discomfort:** The goal is not to feel zero anxiety immediately. The goal is to learn how to tolerate the physical discomfort and prove to your brain that you can handle it.
- **Pacing is Key:** Do not rush to the top of the ladder. Spend as much time as you need on each step, practicing it repeatedly until your distress rating drops significantly before moving forward.

Final Note

The Fear Hierarchy teaches us that overcoming fear is not about taking one giant, terrifying leap. It is about taking a series of small, courageous steps. When you stop avoiding your fears and start systematically facing them, you reclaim your freedom. You teach yourself that you are stronger than your anxiety, creating the necessary space to live an expansive and unrestricted life.