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SKILL SHEET

The Fear Ladder

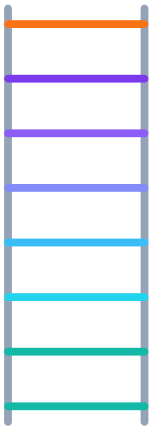
Facing fears step by step

How to build a ladder of small steps and climb it, so fear fades instead of growing.

Avoiding what scares you brings relief today and makes the fear bigger tomorrow. It also stops your brain from learning that the thing is safer than it feels. **Exposure,** facing the fear on purpose in small steps, is one of the best-supported ways to reduce anxiety, phobias, panic and OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Go gradually, and keep going.

START ON THE BOTTOM RUNG

EXAMPLE: FEAR OF DOGS



	FEAR
8 GOAL: visit the grandchildren and their dog	90
7 Pet a friendly dog	70
6 Stand in a park with dogs	60
5 Stand and watch the park for ten minutes	50
4 Walk past the dog park	40
3 Watch a dog through a window	30
2 Look at pictures of dogs	20
1 Think about dogs	10

ONE PRACTICE, WITHIN A STEP



Rated from 0 (no fear) to 100 (the worst). A practice counts even when fear stays high: you are finding out what really happens.

SIX STEPS

1. **Pick one fear.** Write down your fears and choose the first one to work on.
2. **Name your goal.** Why does it matter? Seeing family, your job, something you used to love.
3. **Build the ladder.** List small steps and rate each from 0 (no fear) to 100 (the worst). Include easy, medium and out-of-reach steps.
4. **Adjust the difficulty.** Make a step easier with less time or a friend along, or harder by reversing those.
5. **Climb and repeat.** Start with a step rated about 30 to 50. Before each practice, write what you fear will happen; afterward, write what did. Repeat until it is clearly easier, then move up.
6. **Reward courage.** Say or write: "I did something hard today." Plan a small treat. Keep a record of your progress.

RULES THAT MAKE IT WORK

- **Stay long enough to find out.** Decide beforehand how long you will stay or how many times you will repeat it. Never "until I get too anxious": that rewards escape.
- **Let the feeling be there.** Anxiety is uncomfortable, not dangerous, and it does not have to go down for a practice to count.
- **Drop safety behaviors.** Leaning on a person, your phone, checking or reassurance keeps your brain from learning. Calming skills are fine to help you stay, never to escape.

WHY IT SOMETIMES FAILS

- **Too big, too soon.** A step so hard that you run from it teaches the fear it was right. Make the steps smaller.
- **Stopping too early.** Once or twice is rarely enough. Practice most days.
- **Waiting to feel ready.** Most people feel ready only after a few practices. Start anyway.
- **Some fears need a therapist.** For trauma, OCD or severe fears, work with an experienced therapist.

Source. Adapted and rewritten from the Therapy in a Nutshell videos "The Exposure Hierarchy: How to Do Exposure Therapy for Anxiety" and "How to Do Exposure Therapy for Fears and Anxiety" by Emma McAdam, LMFT. The 0 to 100 ratings and the predict-then-check step are standard exposure therapy.

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