

PARENT HANDOUT: FACING YOUR FEARS



FACING YOUR FEARS USING EXPOSURE

- ▶ “Exposure” is the clinical term for dealing directly with things that make someone anxious, instead of avoiding them.
- ▶ Research shows that approaching situations we fear is the most effective way to decrease anxiety. This can be challenging because avoidance of feared situations is a natural response. However, when we run away from our fear, we are “proving” to ourselves that the thing we are afraid of is too terrible to face.
- ▶ It doesn’t have to be this way! Our Anxiety Skills are designed to help you and your child face fears in a safe way. Exposure gives your child a real world opportunity to see that they can overcome scary situations and reduce anxiety in the process.
- ▶ Exposure is most beneficial and straightforward to address at home when the fear is a specific thing (such as an animal) or situation (such as riding an elevator, speaking in class, or talking to new people).
- ▶ Making an exposure plan can provide your child with repeated experience facing feared situations in a calm and organized way. In an exposure plan, exposures are organized in a hierarchy, from tasks that cause your child the least amount of worry all the way up to situations that create more significant anxiety.
- ▶ These plans are most successful when the tasks are all related to each other and are increasing approximations of the worry that most gets in your child’s way. An example exposure for a child with a worry about making new friends would be simply saying hello to a new child on the playground, and then a later step on the hierarchy could be asking a child to play.
- ▶ Over time, exposure will help your child become more confident and less fearful. They can potentially no longer feel anxious in situations that currently cause them to worry a lot! Or their anxiety may not go away completely, but they will feel more in control and more able to effectively manage worry. This helps your child learn that they can achieve their goals and have fun even when anxious.

HERE’S HOW TO CREATE AN EXPOSURE PLAN

You will need your child’s Fear Thermometer from Anxiety Skill 1, plus our Create Your Own Exposure Plan worksheet on the coming pages, to help you create a plan together. Make copies of the Create Your Own Exposure Plan so you can repeat this process for multiple worries and repeat certain exposures if needed. Review the script below and our examples on the Exposure Plan Examples worksheet before helping your child. This will help you better understand the way exposures work before you get started. The examples show how all the steps of an exposure plan should be connected to your child’s major worry. Adapt the script for your child as needed so they can create their own personalized plan. Your child may have a wide range of unconnected fears on their fear thermometer; this is okay. Work together to pick one specific thing or feared situation to focus on at a time, as exposure works best when there is a clear target on which to focus.

HERE'S HOW TO CREATE AN EXPOSURE PLAN (cont.)

Introducing Creating an Exposure Plan to Your Child:

- 1 “We are going to make a plan to help you face the fears that you put on your Fear Thermometer. One fear that you included is _____.” Work with your child to choose a specific fear that may work well based on our tips, such as a specific thing or situation. Once you both agree, proceed to step 2.
- 2 “We are going to use this worksheet to help us make a plan.” Show your child the Create Your Own Exposure Plan worksheet. “Here, the worksheet has a place for us to write down the name of the worry we will be working on in your exposure. Exposure is the word for facing the thing you are afraid of instead of avoiding it or running away.” You or your child should write the worry you will be working on in the space provided.
- 3 “Right here is a place for us to write down each part of the exposure.” Point at the empty rows 1-6. “The worksheet also has a place for us to rate how you feel before and after you face your fears. The Worry Scale on the page can help us do those ratings.” Point at the Before and After columns and the Worry Scale.
- 4 “Our goal is going to be for you to do the things you need and want to do without feeling too scared or running away. I think you will feel strong and brave!” Add in more ideas about what it could be like for them to conquer their particular fear.
- 5 “That might seem like it could never happen, but I believe in you and you can do it! We will take baby steps to get there.”
- 6 “If you were afraid of swimming, we wouldn’t plan for you to just dive into the ocean without any steps before that. First we might have you put your feet into the water to slowly start getting more comfortable. What is something we can do to that is like that, something that will help you begin to get comfortable?” Wait for your child’s response. Share some responses applicable to their fear that are similar to steps 1 and 2 in our example plans if they can’t come up with anything. You are looking for steps that will be a “warm up” for facing the big fear. You or your child should write these steps down.
- 7 “Great idea! Now let’s think about the next step with this fear. What comes after the steps we just put down? What will we need to do to get even closer to facing and overcoming your fear?” Wait and provide responses similar to steps 3 and 4 on our example plans if needed. Remember, we are taking bigger and bigger steps toward facing the fear! You or your child should write these steps down.
- 8 Now you are ready to name the activities that will be near the top of the exposure plan. “You’ve given so many great ideas for getting more comfortable with this worry! Now let’s talk about what will be our big goal. What are the biggest challenges connected to this fear?” Wait and provide responses similar to steps 5 and 6 in our examples if needed. You or your child should write these steps down. “Good work! Let’s review the worksheet and start to plan how we will begin our exposures.”



PARENT HANDOUT: EXPOSURE PLAN EXAMPLES



Anxiety Skill 4

Exposure Plan Examples

Example 1: Fear of Frogs

This example is for a child who has a fear of frogs, but is also very interested in science and animals. The goal of these exposures is to help the child hold a frog comfortably, a wish they have because of their interests. The example on the Fear Thermometer worksheet also deals with this worry; you can refer back to it now if needed (Anxiety Skill 1).

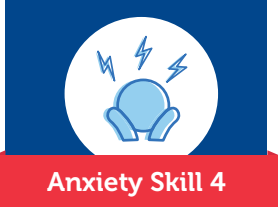
		Before	After
1	Looking at pictures of cartoon frogs on the internet or in a book.		
2	Looking at pictures of real frogs on the internet or in a book.		
3	Looking at frogs in aquariums at the pet store.		
4	Going near frogs in the pond at the science center.		
5	Touching a frog at the science center while an employee holds it.		
6	Holding a frog all by myself at the science center.		

Example 2: Fear of Elevators

This example is for an adolescent who has a fear of elevators. The goal of these exposures is for the adolescent to feel okay riding an elevator alone, an ability they wish to have as they increase their independence.

		Before	After
1	Looking at pictures of an elevator on the internet or in a book.		
2	Watching a video of someone riding in an elevator.		
3	Going to an elevator and standing inside it briefly with a parent.		
4	Going in an elevator and riding it with a parent.		
5	Going in the elevator and standing inside it briefly alone.		
6	Going in the elevator and riding it alone.		

PARENT HANDOUT: CREATE YOUR OWN EXPOSURE PLAN

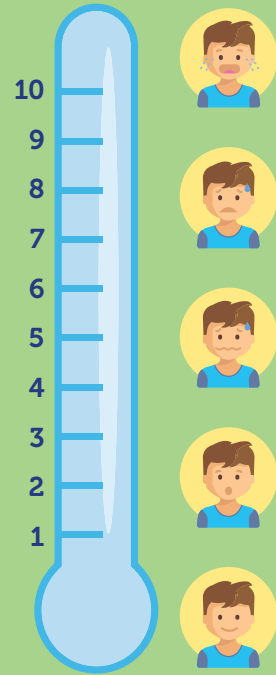


Anxiety Skill 4

Using Your Exposure Plan

- 1 You and your child should pick a time when things are calm and not rushed at home to begin working on exposures. Start with step 1 on your plan, which is the exposure your child rated as easiest to try.
- 2 Before each exposure practice, get a Worry Scale rating. Ask, "Look at the Worry Scale. How worried/afraid do you feel? 1 is not that worried and 10 is the most worried."
- 3 After each exposure practice, get a Worry Scale. Say, "Great job! Look at the Worry Scale. How worried/afraid do you feel? 1 is not that worried and 10 is the most worried."
- 4 Record these Worry Scale ratings next to the exposures listed on your plan. This will help you and your child track their progress over time.
- 5 You can repeat each step above until your child's ratings go down and they notice an exposure is less scary than it was before. Then, move onto step 2 on your plan, the next exposure. Go at a pace that is comfortable for your child, but be consistent about moving through the exposures at a steady pace.

1-10 Worry Scale



Create Your Own Exposure Plan

Put your child's plan here:

	Before	After
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

PARENT HANDOUT: FACING YOUR FEARS TIPS



Anxiety Skill 4

HOW CAN FACING FEARS THROUGH EXPOSURES HELP OUR FAMILY?

- ▶ Children and adolescents who have anxiety often avoid necessary and positive experiences due to their fears. This can impact their functioning at home, school, and with friends. Facing their fears through exposures helps them tackle their fears in a safe, controlled way and can improve their quality of life.
- ▶ Families are often unsure of how to help their child address the things that scare them. These worksheets help parents get organized by giving them a road map to assist their children in tackling their worries. Remember to take your time moving through the plan. As your child builds confidence, it will get easier to face their fears.
- ▶ Anxiety can feel very overwhelming for everyone, and children and adolescents may be unsure of how to articulate their concerns. The Fear Thermometer (Anxiety Skill 1) and Facing Your Fears worksheets in this guide help them identify their worries and break them down into manageable parts to be conquered!

COMMON PARENT CONCERNS

We are having a hard time coming up with ideas for exposures.

Sometimes it is hard to figure out how to “expose” your child to situations that aren’t part of daily life. You can use the internet, books, or magazines to help you look up realistic images and videos of fears (e.g., bugs and heights). Review any media you will use in exposures first before showing them to your child. You can also role play anxiety-provoking scenarios; these can be exposures, too. Use your imagination and get creative!

My child refuses to do the exposures.

Empathize with your child. Tell them that you understand that this is very challenging but that you believe in them. Explain that exposures will help them worry less and have more fun in their lives. Explain that avoiding things actually makes them seem scarier, but that facing them helps us realize we can handle it. Remind them that you will start with the first step of their exposure plan, which they rated as the easiest step, and move through their plan slowly. You can try giving small incentives to encourage and motivate your child (e.g., a special activity once they get to a certain point on their Fear Thermometer).

When we do exposures, my child becomes very distressed. Sometimes they even cry!

It can often be challenging for parents to watch their children feel upset during exposures; however, it’s important to stay supportive and calm as your child learns to cope with their fears. Explain that you understand that this is tough and that they are upset. Remind your child and yourself that completing exposures will help them be less worried over time. If they are still having a hard time, encourage them to use deep breathing or another coping skill (see Anxiety Skill 2). If this doesn’t help, take a break from exposures to do something fun for distraction, but then come back to the exposure later.

We did exposures and my child still has anxiety.

Exposures won’t always “get rid” of anxiety completely. Anxiety at a low level is a normal part of life that can give us useful information about the world. The purpose of exposure is for your child to be able to achieve their goals and have fun, even if they still feel anxious sometimes. If your child has completed their exposures and is still having difficulties functioning at school, home, and/or with friends because of their fears, or if your child is unable to complete their exposures due to anxiety, talk to your primary care provider. They can connect you to a behavioral health specialist who can help.