Exposure hierarchy

Choose a meaningful starting point. Difficulty estimates are optional: 0 = least difficult, 10 = most difficult.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

My goal

Safety and support

Possible step	What I predict	Difficulty 0-10	Support / precautions

First step / agreed materials / review date

Agree safe practice and support. Do not use sharps, cause injury or remove genuine precautions.

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Plan and review one step

Exposure hierarchy - keep genuine safety precautions and choose a step you agree to.

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Chosen step / prediction

What I will look for

Habit to change / support to keep

When, where and agreed endpoint

What actually happened

Learning / next agreed step

Agree safe practice and support. Do not use sharps, cause injury or remove genuine precautions.

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Using this resource

Exposure hierarchy

What this helps with

A hierarchy turns a broad goal into practical options. Steps should relate to what you want to reclaim, not to somebody else's idea of bravery. Difficulty may change with distance, setting, duration or support. Start with a useful, manageable step and adjust after learning from it. A low anxiety score is not the only sign of progress: taking part, testing a prediction and relying less on unnecessary safety habits also matter.

How to use it

1. Write a goal in everyday terms, such as using a room or attending necessary healthcare.
2. List possible steps that approach the fear without introducing real hazards.
3. For each step, record the feared prediction and approximate difficulty from 0 to 10.
4. Identify ordinary safety precautions and support that must remain.
5. Choose one step to plan in detail; revise the order after you review experience.

A fictional worked example

Sam wanted to visit a friend who owned a calm dog. With his therapist and the owner, he listed possible steps: discussing the visit, seeing the dog from a distance, sitting in the garden while the dog stayed with its owner, then sharing a room at an agreed distance. His prediction was that he would lose control and be unable to speak. He did not include touching the dog because that was not needed for his goal. The owner's normal animal-management precautions remained. The first practice step was chosen collaboratively, and Sam planned to record what he actually managed.

Keep in mind

Plan animal encounters with a responsible handler; never approach unfamiliar animals as a test. For blood or needle fears, account for fainting and healthcare advice. A hierarchy does not require real injuries, unnecessary procedures or removal of medical precautions.

Sources and attribution

Craske, M. G., Treanor, M., Conway, C. C., Zbozinek, T., & Vervliet, B. (2014). Maximizing exposure therapy: An inhibitory learning approach. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 58, 10-23.

NHS. Phobias. Accessed 24 October 2026.

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