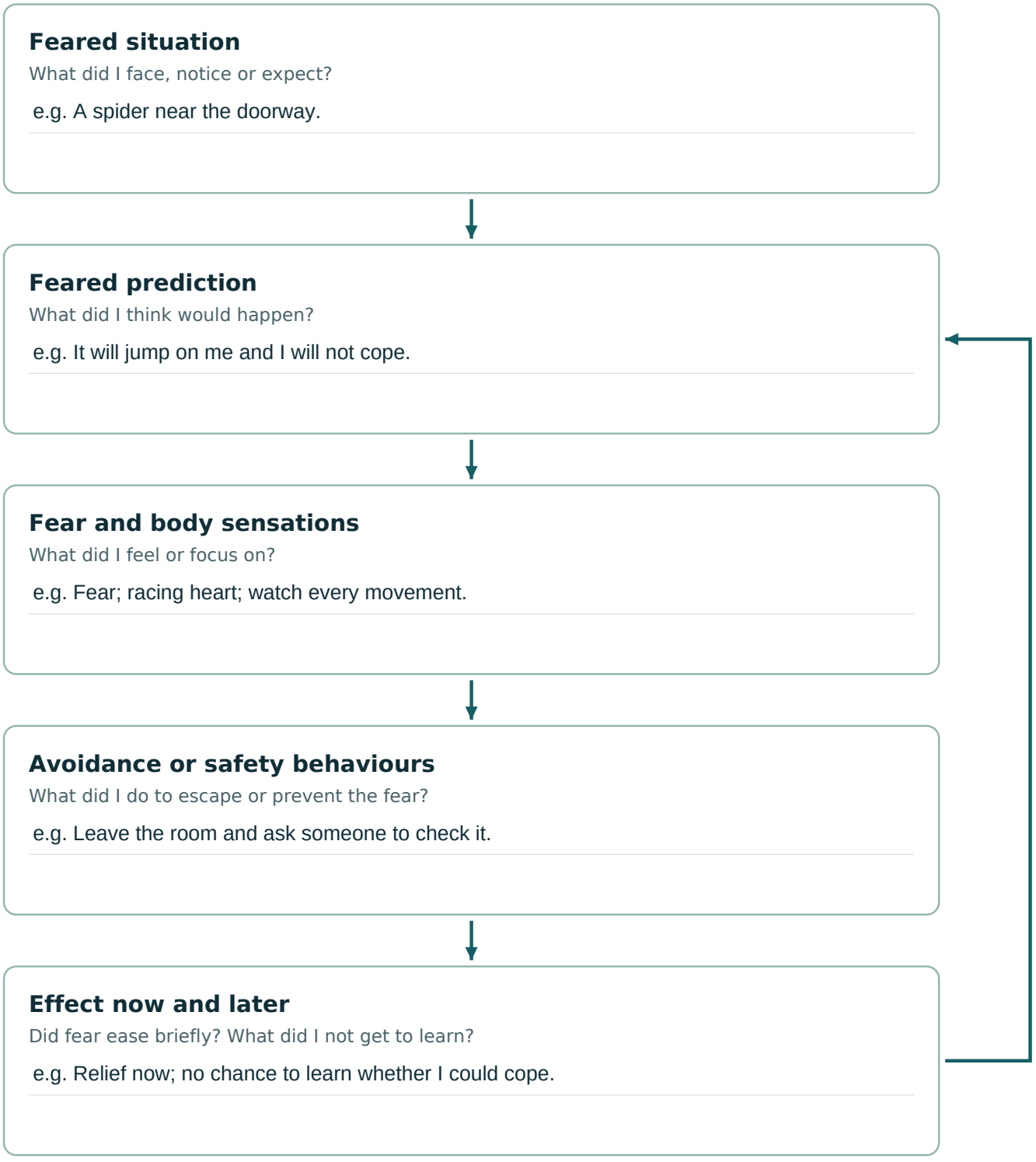
Phobia cycle

Map one example of fear and avoidance. Start at the top; keep genuine safety precautions.

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



The return arrow shows how later effects can keep the pattern going.

A fear-and-avoidance episode map, informed by CBT exposure principles (Craske et al., 2014).

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Using this resource

Phobia cycle

What this helps with

A phobia often involves a particular prediction as well as fear. You might expect harm, loss of control, unbearable disgust or difficulty coping. Escaping or relying on a special routine can bring relief while leaving that prediction untested. This map makes the pattern visible using one ordinary example. It does not assume all danger is imagined, and it does not ask you to start exposure before you have a suitable plan.

How to use it

1. Choose one recent episode, without deliberately seeking out the feared trigger.
2. Describe the trigger and finish: "I expected that..." Include what that would mean to you.
3. Notice feelings, bodily sensations and where your attention went.
4. Record what you did, including avoidance, checking or asking someone else to take over.
5. Read from top to bottom, then follow the return arrow. Which link fits your experience? Discuss a possible change separately; the change itself is not part of the maintaining cycle.

A fictional worked example

When a moth entered the hallway, Priya expected it to fly into her face and thought she would be unable to stay in the house. Her stomach tightened and she watched the doorway closely. She shut herself in the bedroom and asked her partner to check every room. She felt relieved when told it was gone, but next evening checked the hallway before entering. Her map showed that repeated checks were becoming part of the problem. She chose to discuss a gradual plan for using the hallway again, rather than demanding that she stop feeling afraid immediately.

Keep in mind

Keep this exercise descriptive. A map alone does not establish that a situation is safe. If fear involves fainting, physical symptoms, animals or medical procedures, include those concerns in assessment before deciding what to practise.

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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