

CBT Skill: Building an Exposure Ladder

A gradual approach to reducing fear-based avoidance when exposure is clinically appropriate.

What exposure is

Exposure involves intentionally approaching safe situations, sensations, memories, or uncertainties that are avoided because of fear. The goal is not to force distress or prove nothing bad can ever happen; it is to build learning, tolerance, and flexibility.

Build a ladder

- List feared but reasonably safe situations.
- Rate expected distress from 0-100.
- Start with a meaningful but manageable step.
- Repeat long enough to learn that you can remain present without relying on the usual avoidance or safety behavior.
- Move upward gradually based on learning, not on needing anxiety to disappear.

Important

Exposure is not appropriate for actual danger and should be adapted for trauma, OCD, panic, medical limitations, and other clinical considerations. A qualified clinician can help design it safely.

Try this reflection

What is one safe situation you avoid that matters to your life? What would a smaller approach step look like?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.