**Facing My Fears**

**Adapted from:** [www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

There are many useful that are designed to reduce anxiety. Perhaps the most important of all those tools is facing fears. The process of facing fears is called exposure. Exposure involves having your child repeatedly go into feared situations, experiencing less and less anxiety, until s/he is no longer anxious. Exposure is not dangerous and will not make the fear worse. In fact, up until now your child may have been avoiding or escaping from the people, places and things s/he fears, which has maintained the anxiety. By engaging in gradual exposure to his/her fears, your child can learn that these people, places and things are not dangerous, and s/he can cope. Done correctly, exposure can eliminate anxiety once and for all.

**Doing Exposure in 3 Easy Steps**

Exposure begins with the development of a list of the situations, or the parts of a situation, that are scary for your child. Next, you and your child will rank these steps from least to most scary using a 0-10 rating scale. Finally, your child or teen will work his/her way up the list, facing things that initially cause him/her anxiety, but developing confidence and experiencing success along the way. This process often happens naturally. For example, a child or teen that is afraid of water takes swimming lessons every week. S/he starts by putting feet and legs in the water, then the whole body and, finally, diving underwater. Children and teens with a fear of water can learn to love swimming. The same process occurs when children and teens learn to go to the dentist. Exposure is one of the most effective ways of overcoming fears, although it takes some planning, encouragement, modeling, and rewards.

**Step 1: Build your ladder**

Find a time when you and your child can work on this project for about 30 minutes. For younger children, it's okay to accomplish this task at more than one time. You can explain this project as follows; “A few days ago we talked about how anxiety is a bully and has been bossing you around. It is important for you to face your fears, to learn that while going to the dentist may not be the most fun thing in the world, you can get through a dental visit and be okay. Although going to the dentist might be scary at first, and may even be a little uncomfortable at times, with practice you will feel less anxious. To help you face your fear of the dentist, we are going to make a ladder with 8-12 steps of “challenges.” You will get to choose your “challenges” and together we will help you climb your ladder.”

See the next page for an example ladder. If your child has a lot of different fears, build separate ladders for each fear theme. Adjust elements to make the “challenge” easier or harder. These elements can include length of time, distance, time of day, number or type of people nearby, etc. In addition to breaking down the fear into parts, it is important to describe each rung or step on the ladder clearly and specifically. If you and your child cannot clearly describe what s/he is going to do, s/he might not be able to do it. For example, writing out “Put an electric toothbrush in your mouth turned on the lowest/gentlest setting for 30 seconds” is clearer and more specific than “brush your teeth.”

**Fear Ladder**

Construct a ladder of places or situations that you avoid. At the top of the ladder put those which make you most anxious. At the bottom of the ladder put places or situations you avoid, but which don’t bother you as much. In the middle of the ladder put ones that are ‘in-between’. Give each item a rating from 0-10 according to how anxious you would feel if you had to be in that situation. Overcome your anxiety by approaching these situations, starting from the bottom of the ladder.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **My Goal:** | |
| **0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | |
| **No fear Moderate Extreme** | |
| **Situation** | **Anxiety**  **(0-10)** |
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PSYCHOLOGY**TOOLS http://psychology.tools** page1image14178656page1image10000576page1image32251888page1image30206144page1image30269648page1image18360688page1image18370672page1image18368800page1image32373744page1image14167008page1image10015136page1image14205072page1image18370464page1image18362976page1image14200288page1image18362144page1image14216304page1image18364848

**An example of a ladder list for a child with a fear of even going into the dentist’s office might look something like this**:

|  |
| --- |
| **Goal: Calm voice and body while driving to dentist/sitting in waiting room** |
| 5. Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 5 min, tour dental office, including chair, instruments |
| 4. Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 5 min, then leave |
| 3. Drive to dental office, park in lot for 5 min, then leave |
| 2. Drive by dental office |
| 1. Watch pictures/social story/YouTube video of driving to dentist |

**Step 2: Rank your ladder**

Once you have made a list, help your child order the items from least to most scary. You can do this by having your child rate how much fear s/he has for each situation on the list, from “0” (No fear) to “10” (Tons of fear). Each ladder should include a whole range of situations. The ladder should identify 3-5 things your child can do now with some anxiety, 3-5 s/he can do now with moderate anxiety and, finally, 3-5 things s/he finds too difficult to do now. It is important to start small and take gradual steps. It may help to remember that when we climb a ladder, it is easier to do so 1 step at a time. Therefore, your child will need to have at least 1 “challenge” per step. If half of your child’s “challenges” are situated on steps 2-5, and the remainder on steps 8-10, your child will have great difficulty getting from step 5 to step 8.



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| **Goal: Calm voice and body while driving to dentist/sitting in waiting room** | **Level of anxiety (0-10)** |
| 5. Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 5 min, tour dental office, including chair, instruments | 7 |
| 4. Drive to dental office, play in waiting room 5 min, then leave | 6 |
| 3. Drive to dental office, park in lot for 5 min, then leave | 4 |
| 2. Drive by dental office | 2 |
| 1. Watch pictures/social story/YouTube video of driving to dentist | 1 |

**Step 3: Climb your ladder**

Once your child has a ladder, with “challenges” on steps 1 or 2 through 10 your child is ready to climb the ladder. Reward your child with “bravery bucks” or other tokens whenever your child does a challenge on their ladder. Starting with the situation that causes the least anxiety, encourage your child to repeatedly engage in that activity (e.g. repeatedly saying “Hi” to an unfamiliar person) until h/she starts to feel less anxious doing it. If the situation is one that your child can remain in for a period of time (such as keeping mouth open while dentist checks teeth), encourage him/her to stay in the situation until his/her fear level is reduced by half. Pick a time to start the practice when you know you have enough time to see it through until the end (usually 20-30 minutes is sufficient). It’s okay if the first practice turns out to be really easy. This way your child will have a successful experience and will want to try for harder “challenges.”

**Helpful Hints:**

Keep your child on the current “challenge” step until s/he is experiencing little to no anxiety. Then s/he can climb to the next step. Proceed 1 step at a time until you reach the top.

Don’t end an exposure practice when your child’s anxiety is still high because you have run out of time. This is worse than not starting at all because it leaves your child with the memory that this step is scary. S/he will be reluctant to get back on the ladder the next time.

Exposure practices spaced apart, close in time, will result in faster progress. This is akin to strengthening a muscle; 5 sets of 10 muscle reps once per day, will strengthen your muscle faster than an hour of training once per week.

Some youth will do better if you or another trusted adult show them how to do the exposure practice first. For example, allow your child watch you go to a dental cleaning.

Record your child’s progress. Use a piece of paper to record your child’s fear rating before, during and after each practice (see chart below). This will help your child to know when s/he is ready to move up the ladder. When ratings are at the 0-2 level for several days, your child is probably ready to move.

Finally, don’t rush. It can be hard to start facing the things you have avoided for so long. Be encouraging and recognize that your child needs to go at his/her own pace. For some youth this process can take weeks, for others months.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***DATE/CHALLENGE*** | ***START*** | ***HIGHEST DURING*** | ***END*** |
| 1/2/19 Drive to dental office | 3 | 5.5 | 2 |
| 1/3/19 Drive to dental office | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 1/4/19 Drive to dental office | 1 | 2 | 1 |

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**Bravery Challenge Log**

Every time you do an exposure exercise (bravery challenge), record it here:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **ANXIETY RANKING (0-100)** | | |
| **DATE** | **CHALLENGE** | **START** | **HIGHEST DURING** | **END** |
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