

FACING YOUR FEARS



A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy evidence based
approach to help overcome phobias

FACING YOUR FEARS

Welcome!

Well done for taking this step to try and get on top of your phobia. Seeking help can be one of the most difficult steps to make.

This *Facing Your Fears* workbook is based on an evidence-based psychological treatment known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It will guide you through a CBT technique called 'Exposure and Habituation'. This technique has been shown to help many people whose lives are affected by a phobia.

This workbook is designed to be supported by a mental health professional trained to help people get the most out of it. This may be a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner, often shortened to PWP, working within the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme in England. Given the success of this way of working, similar roles to that of the PWP working have also become increasingly available in other countries.

You're in control of how quickly you work through this workbook and how you put the techniques into practice.

What is Exposure and Habituation?

When something causes us to feel afraid or scared, for example a specific object or situation, it's understandable we'll try to avoid it. Avoiding something that causes fear will provide us with relief from the unpleasant feelings we experience when we're afraid - for example, a racing heart or shortness of breath. However, this will mean we feel just as scared the next time we're confronted with the situation or object causing us fear. This leads to the '*vicious cycle of fear and avoidance*'.

Using the '*Exposure and Habituation*' technique helps you confront your fears and break into this '*vicious cycle*' in a supported and gradual way, helping you build up to confronting your fears in a way that will feel manageable to you. The result can be that you feel back in control of your fears and don't have to carry on avoiding situations. A lot of research has found '*Exposure and Habituation*' to be effective, especially for people experiencing fear of specific objects or situations.

Before getting started, it's important to find out a little bit more about the approach used in the *Facing Your Fears workbook*. You'll then be better able to decide whether using this technique is best for you. You'll also be helped to identify if there's anything that may be in the way of you getting the most out of the workbook.

To find out more about the Facing Your Fears workbook, let's read a little about Shay's story and how the approach was used to overcome a fear of dogs.

Shay's Story



I'm 35 years old and have been terrified of dogs for as long as I can remember. I don't know where the fear came from but growing up my parents were scared of dogs too. I was becoming increasingly concerned that I might somehow pass on my fears to my son, Quinn. Since having Quinn, my fear had more of an impact on me; it was becoming harder and harder to avoid places where I thought there might be dogs. I was unable to take Quinn to play at a friend Sam's house, because they had a dog, so Sam would always have to come to our house instead. I'm sure Sam's parents would think I was rude. It even started affecting me in my own home if I heard a dog barking outside and watching TV was difficult if a dog came on the screen.

One day I started to think about the impact my fear of dogs was having, how much Quinn was missing out on and it didn't seem right that I had to rely on my partner so much. So, I decided I needed to get on top of my fear but had no idea where to start! I searched the internet and found some information on the 'NHS Choices' website about how something called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy could be helpful and I clicked on a link to find a free NHS service near me.

I was really surprised as the service would allow me to refer myself. So I just filled in an online form and within a couple of days was offered an appointment with Barjinder, a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner.

When we met, Barjinder asked me a lot of questions about the things going through my head, how I felt in my body, things I was doing more or less of and how I was feeling. At first all these questions seemed a bit odd and I couldn't see how they were relevant. I also felt a little embarrassed as I couldn't really identify any thoughts when I saw a dog, I just felt scared very quickly. However, when Barjinder related my fear of dogs to something called a *Vicious Cycle*, it started to make sense. For the first time, I could see that what I did and how I felt physically, impacted on one another and made my fear even worse.

We spent some time talking about the idea of 'specific phobias' that people develop. I had never thought of my fear of dogs as a 'phobia'. Anyway, I'd only heard of people having phobias around things like spiders, snakes and small spaces. But Barjinder taught me that people can have specific phobias about all sorts of things and that whilst fear

is a normal emotional response to danger in our environment, a phobia develops when the fear experienced is significant and persistent. Also, a phobia is more commonly an ‘irrational’ fear that is often greater than any actual or real threat posed by the thing we fear, in my case dogs. I didn’t like the sound of this at first as my fear of dogs felt very real and very justified and I had read about dog attacks happening sometimes.

Also, if there was nothing to fear why would even the mention of dogs make me feel so scared? I thought this *must* mean there was something to be scared of.

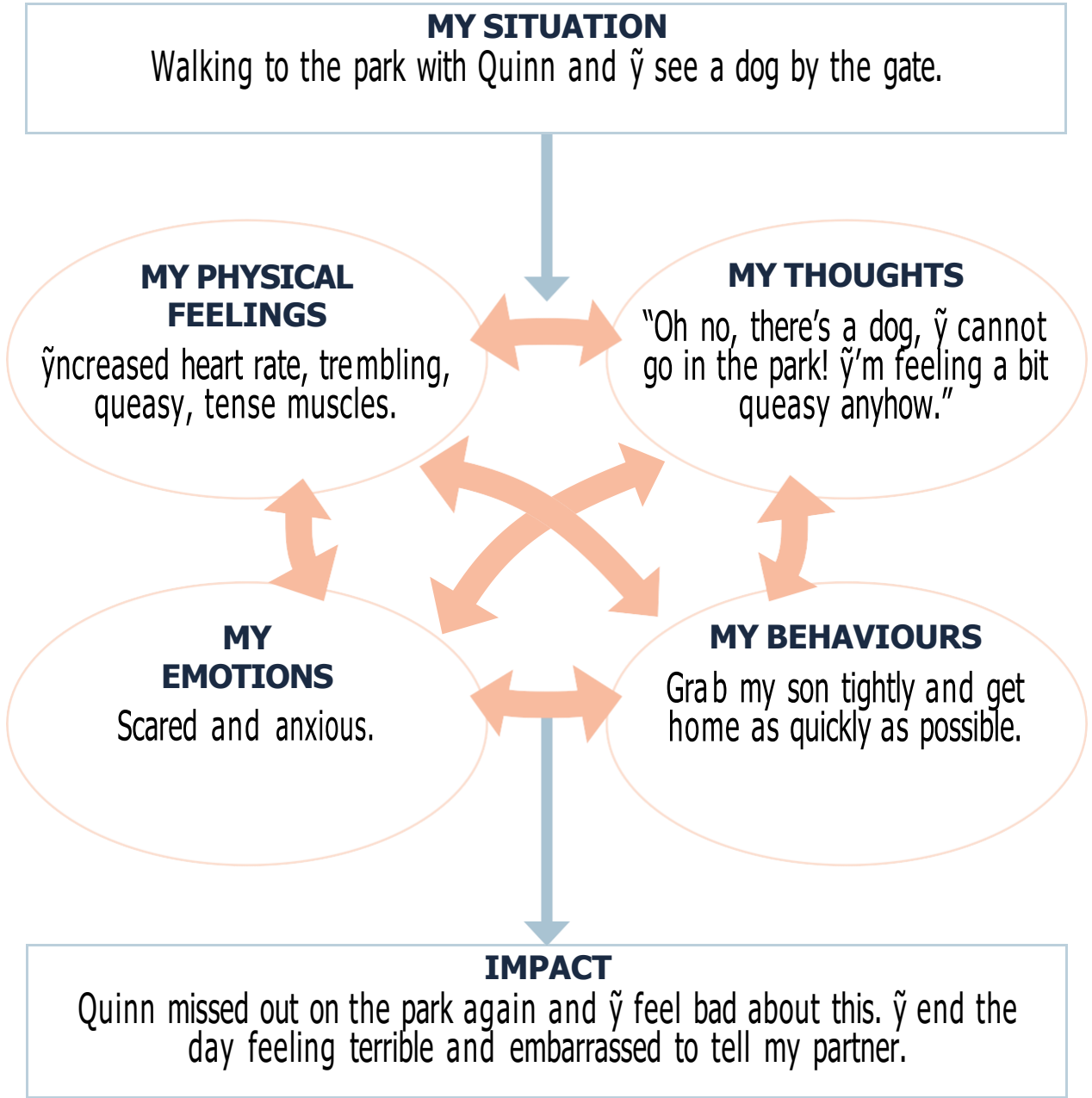
Barjinder suggested a self-help workbook called *Facing Your Fears* based on something called ‘Exposure and Habituation’ may be helpful. The idea of having to confront my fear of dogs still sounded terrifying. However, Barjinder then explained how I would start to face my fears in a graded and manageable

way and go as quickly as I wanted to go with support available to overcome any difficulties if I ran into them. Each support session would last no longer than half-an-hour. Given how busy work was for me, this sounded just about manageable, especially juggling work and a small child! It got even better when Barjinder said support was available over the telephone, this would save me from travelling on the bus to get to support sessions. Over the coming weeks, Barjinder helped me work through the workbook and this helped me really understand why I felt the way I did, even when I saw a picture of a dog and why I responded a particular way. The workbook then helped me work through the ‘Exposure and Habituation’ approach. I can’t say it was always easy but breaking my phobia down into manageable steps helped. I’m really glad I completed this treatment as I’m now able to do much more with Quinn. Last week I even took him to Sam’s house and was invited in for a cup of tea, with Bingley their Basset Hound running around my legs.

Understanding the Vicious Cycle

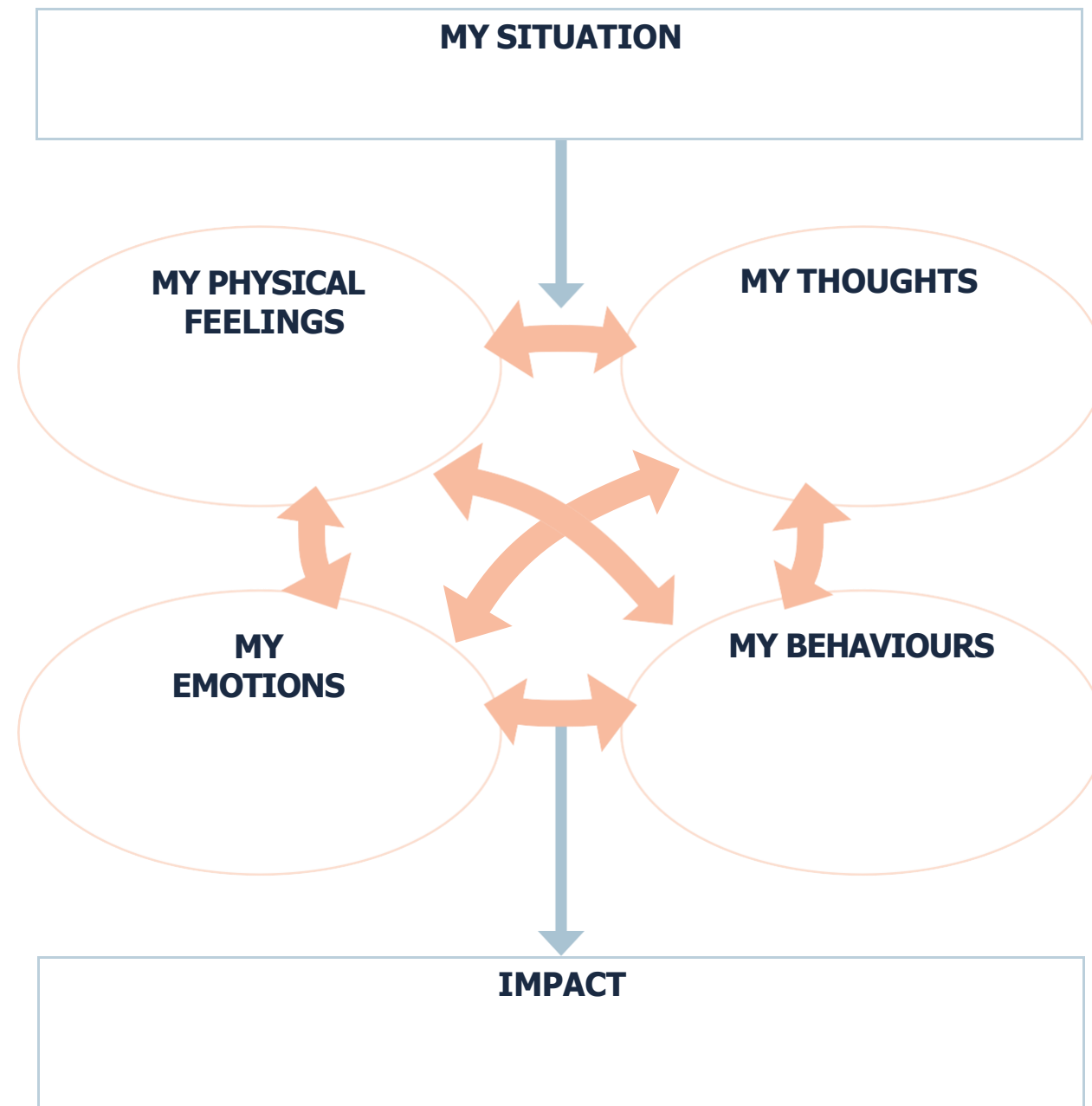
First of all, let’s try to understand how your phobia may be affecting you by completing the different sections of the Vicious Cycle Worksheet. It may first help to have a look at Shay’s completed worksheet. Then, using the **Vicious Cycle Worksheet** overleaf,

think about a recent time when your phobia was triggered and write down your emotions, physical feelings, behaviours and any thoughts you had at a time you were afraid and think about the impact this has on your life.





My Vicious Cycle Worksheet

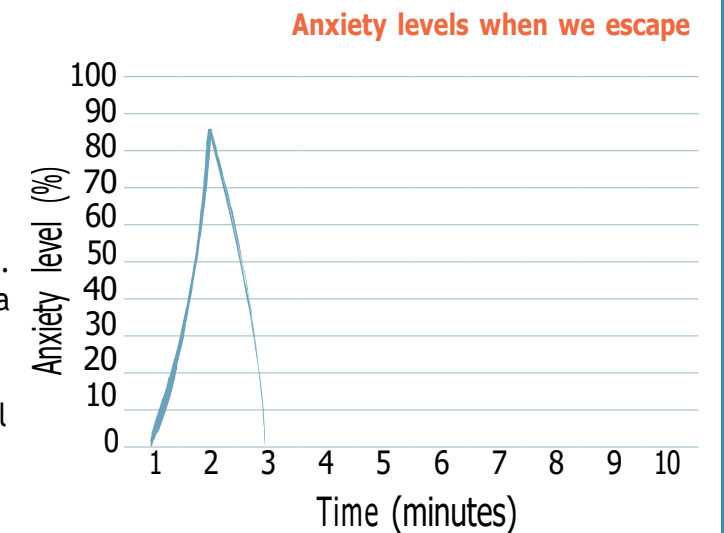


Breaking the Vicious Cycle

Before we try to get on top of your phobia, it's worth spending a little time trying to understand how phobias develop and what keeps them going.

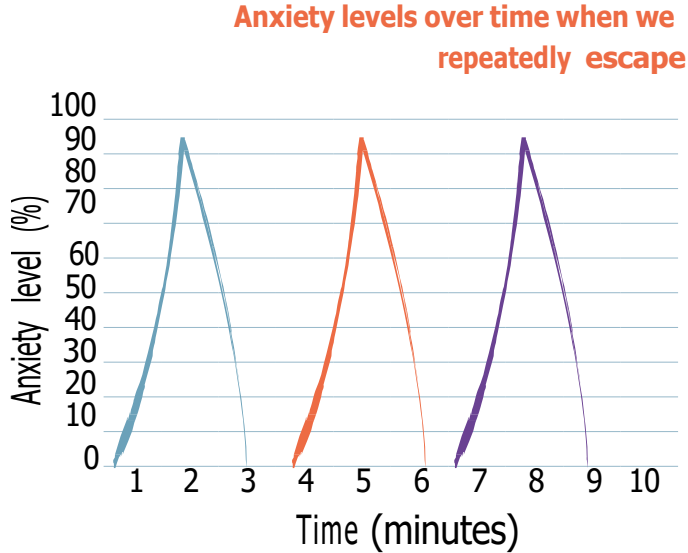
The Vicious Cycle of Fear and Avoidance

As we can see in Shay's vicious cycle, when the dog was seen, physical feelings quickly became overwhelming and the behavioural response was to escape the situation and get home. This is a type of behaviour called 'avoidance'. As we can see when the source of a phobia is avoided there will usually be a quick reduction in fear-related physical feelings and we start to feel better. Avoiding whatever is making us feel afraid may understandably feel the right thing to do.



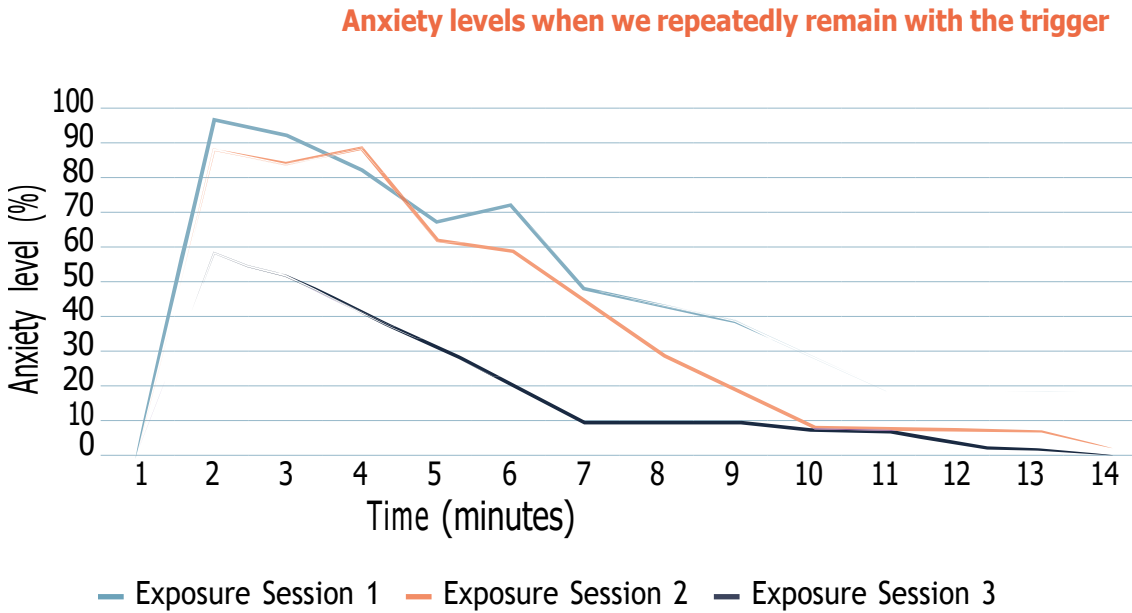
Maintaining Our Fear

However, by simply avoiding whatever is causing us to feel fearful, we soon teach ourselves that avoiding the source of our fear feels better than confronting it. Avoidance brings us immediate relief and can soon create a ‘*pattern of avoidance*’. However, the next time we face the source of our phobia, our fear-related physical feelings quickly go up again and our ‘*pattern of avoidance*’ starts again. Over time, we learn that the only way we can manage our fear is to avoid the source of our phobia when it’s encountered. This leads to the *Vicious Cycle* you have identified above.



Breaking the Vicious Cycle

So, let’s start to think about a way to break this *Vicious Cycle*. You’ve hopefully identified that whilst *avoiding* whatever is causing fear can bring relief in the short-term, a *pattern of avoidance* prevents the fear from being reduced in the longer-term. A technique called *Exposure and Habituation* will help you overcome your fear when faced with the source of your phobia. This approach will support gradual exposure to the source of fear in a manner that’s acceptable to you and help you identify what happens to your level of fear if you actually remain in the situation. What commonly happens when the situation is not avoided is that the level of fear will naturally come down, a process called ‘habituation’.



Exposure and Habituation

Now it’s time to try and get on top of your phobia through *Exposure and Habituation*. The aim of this approach is to help you confront your fear.

First of all, identify and write down the specific phobia you want to overcome at the top of the ‘Phobia Ladder Worksheet’ on page 16. Even thinking about this phobia may already be starting to cause a little fear. If so, bear with it as the approach will help you confront this phobia in a gradual structured way that is acceptable and manageable for you. You will remain in ‘control’ at all times and of course you’ll be supported. Whilst exposure can be challenging, the *Four Rules of Exposure* make the approach effective.

Rule 1: Graded – Rating exposure activities in terms of their fear	
What to Do	Important Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think about different activities you associate with the chosen phobia.• Rate each activity between 0-100 in terms of how much fear you anticipate it will cause.• Write the activity causing you most fear at the top of your <i>Phobia Ladder Worksheet</i> then grade following activities in terms of the fear level, putting those causing least fear at the bottom.• Select the activity you feel you could manage to start your exposure from.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don’t separate activities in the hierarchy in terms of time. We don’t know how long it will take for the level of fear to drop by 50% and this will vary from person to person.• Ensure all activities chosen are anticipated to cause you at least 50% fear at the start of the exposure exercise.• It can help to include an activity at the very top of your <i>Phobia Ladder Worksheet</i> that is unlikely you’re going to have to do on a regular basis.

Rule 2: Prolonged – Staying in the situation	
What to Do	Important Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work your way up from activities listed at the bottom of the <i>Phobia Ladder Worksheet</i> at a manageable rate for you.• Expose yourself to each activity until your level of fear has dropped by at least 50% of the rating given at the start of the exposure exercise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don’t separate activities in the hierarchy in terms of time. We don’t know how long it will take for the level of fear to drop by 50% and this will vary from person to person.
Rule 3: Repeated – Repeat each exposure activity	
What to Do	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Repeat your exposure to each activity in the hierarchy until your fear rating at the start of the exercise is 40% or lower.• Continue to work up your Phobia Ladder to begin exposure to the next activity you rated as having at least 50% fear and continue process.	
Rule 4: Without Distraction – Allow yourself to ‘feel the fear’	
What to Do	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify anything that helps you distract yourself to reduce your fear. These can be highly individual but may include things such as always going places with a friend, listening to music, wearing dark glasses, closing your eyes, seeking reassurance, playing with your phone etc.• To ensure Exposure and Habituation works for you, you need to ensure that anything being used to reduce your fear is no longer relied upon to distract you from experiencing the fear.• If you feel it’s too hard to drop anything at first this is fine. As long as the activity that reduces your fear is still anticipated to cause you at least 50% fear at the start of the exposure exercise write it down in your <i>Phobia Ladder Worksheet</i>.• Consider rating it again with the distraction removed and place it higher in the <i>Phobia Ladder Worksheet</i>.	

When doing Exposure and Habituation it’s helpful to plan it carefully to make it both manageable and successful. We recommend you use two worksheets, *Phobia Ladder* and *Facing My Phobia* to help guide you through the process of planning and reviewing the progress you have made towards overcoming your phobia. Before starting Exposure and Habituation to overcome your phobia, let’s first check in with Shay and see how the approach was used to overcome a fear of dogs.

Phobia Ladder Worksheet

Phobia You Want to Overcome: My fear of dogs

Fear Rating	Activity Hierarchy	Anticipated Fear Rating (0-100)
Most Fear	Lying on the floor as a dog jumps over me.	100
	Stroking a dog off a lead.	100
	Being near a dog off a lead.	90
Medium Fear	Being the other side of the park where dogs are off their leads.	80
	Being no closer than about 20 metres from a dog but on a lead.	70
	Being close to my neighbour's dog on a lead.	70
Least Fear (Should rate at least 50)	Watching dogs when on television without closing my eyes.	60
	Talking about dogs.	
	Looking at pictures of dogs.	50

Fear Rating				
0	25	50	75	100
No Fear	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Very Severe

Facing My Phobia Worksheet

Exposure Exercise: Being no closer than about 20 metres from a dog, but on a lead.

Date and Time of Exercise		Exposure Fear Ratings (0-100)			Minutes	Comments
		Preparation for Exercise	Start of Exercise	End of Exercise	Duration of Exercise	
14/7/17	Exposure 1	50	70	35	18	ŷ really didn't want to do this as it felt uncomfortable, but realise ŷ need to sort it. Was tough though.
16/7/17	Exposure 2	40	65	30	12	Was little better than before in my fear level but it dropped quicker this time.
17/7/17	Exposure 3	40	60	30	9	Can see this working, my fear dropped much quicker this time.
19/7/17	Exposure 4	20	50	20	7	My fear was 50 at the start but thought best to complete, it felt good to complete, see it working.
21/7/17	Exposure 5	10	40	10	2	Although at the start my fear was less than 50 just wanted to make sure things got better and they did.
	Exposure 6					

Fear Rating				
0	25	50	75	100
No Fear	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Very Severe



Phobia Ladder Worksheet

Phobia You Want to Overcome:

Fear Rating	Activity Hierarchy	Anticipated Fear Rating (0-100)
Most Fear		
Medium Fear		
Least Fear (Should rate at least 50)		



Facing My Phobia Worksheet

Exposure Exercise: .

Date and Time of Exercise	Exposure Fear Ratings (0-100)			Minutes	Comments
	Preparation for Exercise	Start of Exercise	End of Exercise	Duration of Exercise	
	Exposure 1				
	Exposure 2				
	Exposure 3				
	Exposure 4				
	Exposure 5				
	Exposure 6				





Staying on Top of Your Phobia

Well done on getting this far. Hopefully you've found the workbook helpful in reducing your fear of the specific phobia that was having an impact on your life.

So, you can keep on top of your phobia(s) in the future, it's important to make the techniques you've learnt in this workbook part of your daily life. It can therefore be of benefit to think about things you've found particularly helpful. Completing the '*Staying Well Toolkit*' will help you do this. This can serve as a useful reminder about how you've overcome the phobia you've been working on. Or indeed maybe you want to apply the exposure and habituation approach to other phobias you may have.

If so however, there are a couple of things to consider before doing this.

- ▶ '*Exposure and Habituation*' is a very effective approach to overcome many, many, phobias. With some phobias however (for example Blood Injury) there are additional considerations that may need to be taken into consideration. Before trying this approach on other phobias therefore, it may be worth checking things out with your PWP or another health professional.

▶ Whilst fear is a common emotional response associated with a phobia, it can also be a normal and helpful emotion that enables us to prepare for potential threats or dangers that do exist in our environment. For example, think about potential dangers there may be when walking home late at night on your own. In these circumstances the physical symptoms associated with fear may be helpful in several ways. For example, by raising levels of attention making us more alert to potential threats or preparing our bodies for action if required.

Before deciding to use 'Exposure and Habituation' on other things that cause you fear therefore, always try to distinguish between situations where fear may be appropriate and phobias where the level of fear may be greater than the threat posed.



My Staying Well Toolkit Worksheet

What activities helped me feel better?

What skills have I learnt working through this workbook?

What techniques have I learnt from this workbook that were really helpful?

What helped me put these activities, skills and techniques into practice?



My Notes



My Notes

My Notes



My Notes



Authors

Professor Paul Farrand is Director of the Low-Intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (LICBT) portfolio within Clinical Education Development and Research (CEDAR); Psychology at the University of Exeter. His main clinical and research interests are in LICBT, especially in a written self-help format. Based upon his research and clinical practice with people experiencing physical health problems, Paul has developed a wide range of written CBT self-help interventions for depression and anxiety and is the editor of the forthcoming *Low-Intensity CBT Skills and Interventions: A Practitioner's Manual* (2020), a training manual published by SAGE, to enhance the competency of a practitioner level mental health workforce in LICBT. Related to these areas, he is a member of several national level committees associated with the Department of Health Improving Access to

Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme and developing a broader psychological therapies workforce and at an international level concerning worldwide developments in LICBT. Outside of work, Paul enjoys spending time with his family, particularly walks in the countryside with his two black Labrador dogs.

Mike Sheppard is a Lecturer, teaching on the Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner training programme within the Clinical Education Development and Research (CEDAR) group at the University of Exeter. He has a special interest in performance anxiety and was involved in the development of a CBT self-help intervention to support students. Outside of work Mike balances his time between his obsession with 80's metal music - playing guitar, surfing and signing up for overly-ambitious ultramarathons.

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