Shy No Longer

MODULE 10

Graded Exposure: Building Situation Stepladders

Introduction

In Module 1, we mentioned that avoidance is one way that social anxiety is maintained. While it might feel natural to avoid some situations, you will need to face your fears in a real situation and begin to turn social activity into a positive experience. Let's call this "**situational exposure**".

Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to "jump in the deep end" and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it "step-by-step". We call this "**graded exposure**", Sometimes, if you try to tackle your biggest fear straight away, it can end up being too overwhelming, or it may even leave you more anxious than when you started. Graded situational exposure consists of structured and repeated exposure to anxiety-provoking social situations. These are presented in levels of difficulties, starting with the situation that provokes the least amount of anxiety and moving towards more challenging situations.

HOW DOES SITUATIONAL EXPOSURE WORK?

Exposure gives you the chance to disconfirm your fears. People with anxiety in social situations often think that the likelihood of a social disaster happening is very high, and continue to avoid these situations. Taking the first step might feel the hardest. At first, the anxiety might feel uncomfortable, but by staying in the situation you can learn that what actually happens is not so bad after all.

Exposure gives you the chance to use your skills. Feeling comfortable in these situations is not instantaneous. First of all you need to stay in the situation long enough so that your body adjusts your anxiety downward. Then you can use the strategies you have learnt so far to help you cope with anxious thoughts and feelings.

Exposure gives you the chance to get used to social situations. By continuing with more and more exposure tasks, repeatedly confronting situations in which you had previously felt embarrassed or anxious, you will become used to them. It might not feel like it at first, but it does happen. By entering into these situations, in a planned and proper way, your body will respond more calmly. After a while these situations will lose their power to bring on as much anxiety as they had before.

Exposure gives you the chance to improve your confidence in social situations. If you plan these steps carefully, you will build up on your confidence and this will allow you to take further steps forward. With increased confidence, you are more likely to face what you call your 'fears'.

The Situation Stepladder

We can now start building a stepladder of exposure situations that you can begin to climb. Remember that by taking a step-by-step approach you can get through the smaller challenges, which will in turn help you feel more confident.

In this module, we'll focus mainly on planning your stepladder. *If you are finding the tasks particularly difficult or are concerned that you will find this task particulalry difficult, enlist the help of a friend.*

1. SITUATIONS THAT YOU FEAR AND AVOID

First of all, let's look at the social situations you tend to avoid. You can list these on the next page. You may not have thought much about the kinds of situations that you avoid, so this exercise will increase your awareness about them. If you have been working through your thought diaries, you've probably mentioned a few situations that you've felt anxious about and avoided, so it might be worthwhile looking at those. We'll be using these situations when we look at building the stepladder, so try list a few different ones.

To give you an idea, below are some examples of situations that often cause distress for people with social anxiety. If you see any that seem familiar to you, you can rephrase them on your "Social Situations that I Avoid" list, so that they are more relevant to you.

- Being the center of attention
- Meeting new people
- Talking to people.
  - People in authority, strangers, friends, or acquaintances?
- Presentations or talking in front of people
- Being watched while doing something such as signing your name, eating, or drinking
  - People you know or strangers?

- Parties and social gatherings.
  - Small groups or large groups?
  - Friends or people you don't know?
- Being assertive, such as making a complaint, inquiring about a problem, or refusing a request
- Being complimented
- "Bumping into someone" you know unexpectedly
- Receiving feedback

Write down the situations in the left column. Ignore the right column ("SUDS") for now.

Social Situations That I Avoid

Situation	SUDS

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2. SUDS: SUBJECTIVE UNITS OF DISTRESS

You may have noticed the word SUDS in the second column. This stands for **S**ubjective **U**nits of Distress **S**cale. This rating is a little like the way you rated the intensity of emotions in the thought diaries. The SUDS scale is a numerical rating from 0-100 that indicates your level of distress and anxiety in a social situation. These ratings will help you to track changes over time. To practise using the scale, read through the following guide, then try to think of an example of when you've felt that level of distress and anxiety.

SUDS Rating	Description	Can you think of a situation when you've felt this way?
0	You feel absolutely no distress, you are calm and relaxed. Eg laying in the bath, having a massage, watching a funny movie.	
25-49	You feel *a mild* level of anxiety but you can still cope with the situation. You might feel like you're more alert or a little nervous. Eg. Athletes before a competition, and even confident speakers before a public presentation.	
50-64	You feel a *moderate* level of distress that is becoming difficult to cope with. You might be distracted by the anxiety, or behaving in ways to avoid anxiety eg avoiding eye contact, sitting quietly, but still attending to what's happening.	
65-84	You feel a *high* level of distress that is really difficult to cope with. You're more concerned with your anxiety and how to escape, and less able to concentrate on what's happening around you.	
85-100	You feel a *severe to extreme* level of distress and you think you cannot cope. Your body response is so overwhelming that you think you can't possible stay in the situation any longer.	

Use this guide to rate your level of distress in the situations that you have listed on the previous page.

- Use any number between 0 and 100 to represent how much distress you would feel in the situation.
- Use the numbers to represent how much distress **you** feel in the particular situation, rather than how distressed you think you look to everyone else.

Now that you have identified a number of situations that you fear and avoid, how do you build a stepladder to where you want to get to? First of all, let's take a look at where it is that you do want to get to by *planning your goals.* After that you can start thinking about the steps you'll need to take to reach those goals by *building your stepladder.*

It's important to be specific when it comes to building stepladders and working towards your goals. Many people who have used this type of exposure have found that small, specific steps helps them feel comfortable with the situation by knowing what's coming up. It also means that you'll be able to make sure the steps are small enough to take, but big enough that you believe you're heading in the right direction.

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3. PLANNING GOALS

Let's think about how you can turn those situations that you fear and avoid into specific goals that you would like to achieve. When you're planning goals for exposure you can follow the acronym **PRAMS**: **P**ersonal, **R**ealistic, **A**chievable, **M**easurable, **S**pecific.

Personal: Choose the situations you listed that are most relevant to you at the moment. For example, if you feel anxious about eating in public and your avoidance of that situation is interfering in your ability to enjoy the company of your family or friends, then you might set a goal in that area.

Realistic: For example, expecting not to feel any anxiety is not realistic, as we all feel some anxiety at times, and sometimes it can even *help* our performance! Generate goals that are possible.

Achievable: Similarly, write goals that are achievable for you at the moment. Perhaps singing a ballad at a friend's wedding is an unreachable expectation for most people, let alone for you right now. Generate goals that are probable.

Measurable: Make sure your goals can be easily measured. "Speaking to people *with confidence* at a party" might be difficult because "confidence" is hard to measure. Action based goals are easier to measure: "Speaking to someone at a party for at least 2 minutes" allows you to accurately assess whether you've reached that goal.

Specific: As the above example shows, goals also need to be specific. So, if the situation that you avoid is "Eating out in public" then your specific goal could be "To eat a meal in a restaurant". If the situation is "Talking at meetings" then your goal might be "To comment on an agenda item at a monthly team meeting".

To start with, you might want to just choose just a few situations to turn into goals, rather than trying to do it all at once.

- Choose situations that you want to change, rather than planning goals that are not very important to you.

- Choose situations over a range of different SUDS levels so that you can set some easier, less distressing goals, but at the same time you don't exclude the more difficult, distressing goals.

Based on the situations that you listed under "Situations That I Avoid", write down the specific goals you would like to achieve below. It is also useful to rate your SUDS level for each goal as it may have changed from when you were thinking of it as a general situation.

Specific Goals	SUDS (0-100)
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

4. BUILDING STEPLADDERS

In situational exposure it is important to determine how you can reach your goals. You need to break down each goal into smaller steps so it is a little like climbing a ladder towards your main goal. Try to think of a set of exposure tasks that start with less anxiety provoking situations, then build up in intensity until you reach your main goal. The number of steps depends on how much distress is associated with the particular goal. A high-challenge exposure situation (SUDS: 80+) will need more steps than a medium-challenge exposure situation (SUDS: 40-60).

Perhaps you avoid going out with your friends because you are worried that everyone is watching you, that they'll draw attention to you and embarrass you. Your specific goal might be to go out to a pub or a party on a weekend evening and stay there for at least 2 hours. This might be quite a difficult goal, with a SUDS rating of 80. You can break this goal into smaller steps by changing WHO is there, WHAT you do, WHEN you do it, WHERE you do it, and HOW long you do it for. Sometimes your goals will be opportunity-specific, that is, there might not always be a steady stream of parties where you can practise your steps. So you need to think of situations that can act as steps that will still help you to climb the ladder to your goal. Below is an example of building a stepladder. On the next page is some space for you to complete the steps for your own goal.

EXAMPLE:

GOAL: To go out to a pub on a weekend night and stay there for at least 2 hours	SUDS (0-100)
	80

	STEP	SUDS
1	Go to the local pub on a week day afternoon, (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a drink and stay for 10 minutes	30
2	Go to the local pub on a week day afternoon (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a drink and stay for 30 minutes	45
3	Go to the local pub on a weeknight, staying from 7pm to 8pm (with a friend who knows about the problem)	55
4	Go to the local pub on a weekend night, stay at least 30 minutes (with a friend who knows about the problem)	65
5	Go to the local pub on a weekend night staying from 8 pm to 10pm (with friends who know about the problem)	70
6	Go to the local pub on a weekend night staying from 8 pm to 10pm (some of the friends don't know about the problem)	80

Remember, your stepladder might have more or fewer steps depending on how difficult the challenge is (how high the SUDS rating is). You can also include more 'in-between' steps if you think the jump between one step and the next is too big.

Situation Stepladder

GOAL:	SUDS

	STEP	SUDS

Break the goal into smaller steps by changing

- WHO is there
- WHAT you do
- WHEN you do it
- WHERE you do it
- HOW long you do it for

Module Summary

- One of the ways to start turning your thoughts into actions is through "graded exposure", or "situational exposure". This means that you begin to confront your fears in a step-by-step approach

- Situational exposure is helpful because when you enter the social situations that you usually avoid, in a planned and proper way, your body will react more calmly. After a while these situations will lose their power to bring on as much anxiety as they did .

- Building situation stepladders is part of a process

  ➢ Identify the social situations that you feel anxious in and tend to avoid

  ➢ Use SUDS (Subjective Units of Distress Scale) ratings as a gauge of how much distress you feel in particular situations, from 0 - 100. This rating scale will help you to plan your situation stepladders, and it will help you to track changes in level of anxiety over time.

  ➢ Plan specific goals that give you something to aim for. When you're planning goals for exposure you can follow the acronym **PRAMS**: **P**ersonal, **R**ealistic, **A**chievable, **M**easurable, **S**pecific.

  ➢ Build stepladders by breaking down each goal into smaller steps. Use the SUDS scale to plot the order of steps so it is a little like climbing a ladder towards your main goal. You can make each step easier or harder by adjusting the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and HOW component in each step.

In the next module we will look at how to actually work through your stepladders.

Coming up