

Graphic 1

“Exposure therapy” overcomes a fear by facing it in gradual steps.

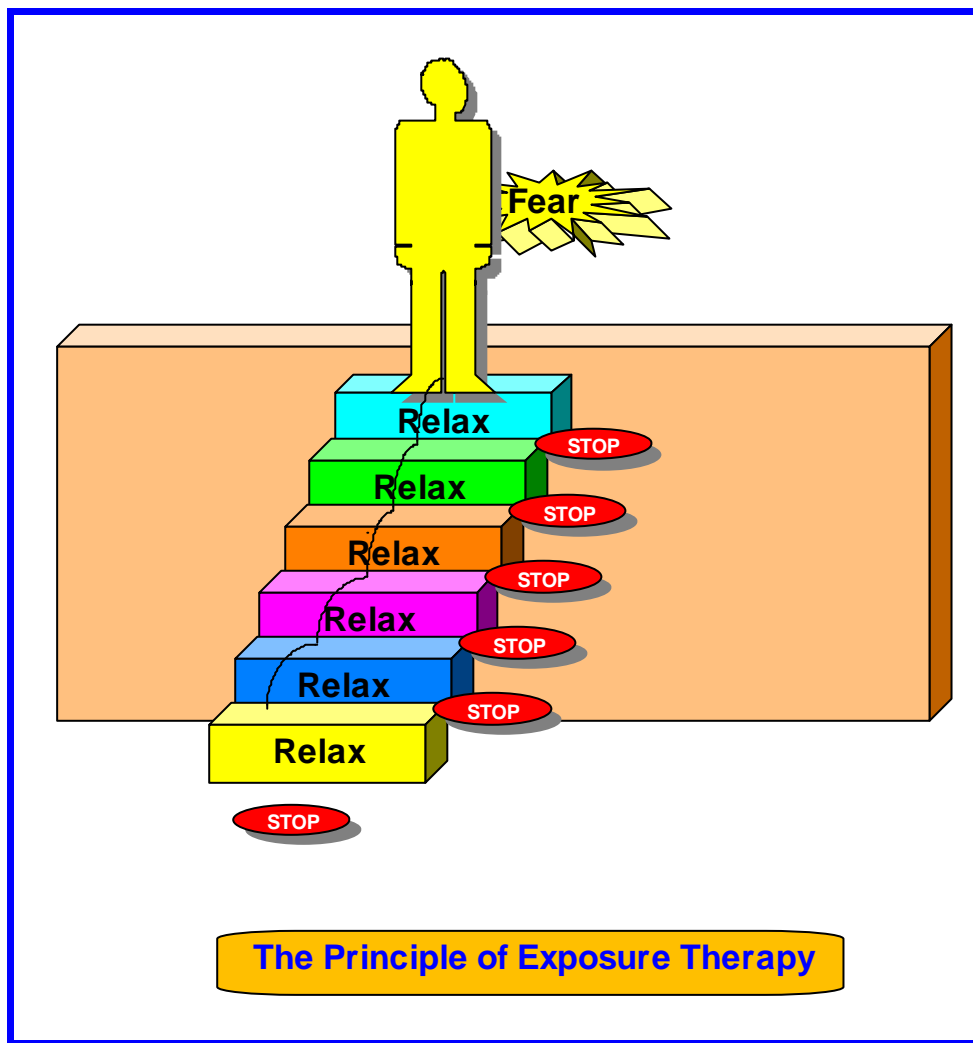
Break your fear into small manageable steps. (See Graphic 1 and page 3.) Each step should cause a moderate level of distress (neither too low nor too high). The basic idea of exposure therapy is to remain at each tolerable step long and often enough for the fear to burn itself out.

The body’s fear system can naturally correct itself after it goes haywire if you give it a few chances to flare up and fizzle out. Each ‘flare and fizzle’ usually requires about 30-60 minutes. (This time can vary between a few minutes to a maximum of 4 hours.) A burn out effect eradicates much of the fear at each step. However a small part of the improvement each time you face your fear is simply due to nerves temporarily tiring. This means that when you face the same step after a break, the fear will have bounced back a little. It will be a bit stronger than it was in the final stages of your last step. But it will not be as bad as when you first faced it (e.g. it settles more quickly). So, you have to repeat the process a few times (say 4 or 5) at the same step to get the full benefit of the burn out effect. This will finish off that part of the fear that remains due to the fatigue effect.

Stay at each step until you are relaxed times (say 4 or 5 times.) Only then should you move up to the next one. Do not aim at perfect relaxation though. Otherwise it can take too long. Moderate relaxation is fine.

Always avoid stepping back at the peak of fear - instead wait for it to pass. Otherwise fear is simply strengthened at the “exit” level. If you feel you cannot cope with a step, then you have bitten off more than you can chew. Simply work out a smaller, more manageable step. The new step will need to have some fear in it of course. Otherwise nothing is burnt out.

Relaxation increases automatically with this “graded exposure”. However, it develops more quickly when combined with breathing control, calming self-talk (e.g. “I’ll just breathe slowly and steadily and let this pass”) and deeply relaxed muscles. All of these send signals to your fear system that things are settling. Over time all this trains it to react more calmly.



Graphic 2
Fear reduction in the final stages of exposure.

Exposure Hierarchy

Step 1: _____

Step 2: _____

Step 3: _____

Step 4: _____

Step 5: _____

Step 6: _____

Step 7: _____

Step 8: _____

Step 9: _____

Step 10: _____