**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

Here the thing, the tools of CBT are so powerful they can be used in any area of your life. They are in effect life changing. The good news is you don’t need to be experiencing major emotional or psychological issues to gain the benefits of CBT. Now these tools can be used throughout your life to improve your well being and get you closer to our real self.

The core concept of CBT is that our thoughts (cognitive) influences what we do (behaviour) and how we feel. Our thoughts are so powerful it is the lenses which we view our world. Is the glass half full or half empty?



The choice you make whether it is optimistic or pessimistic depends on the lenses you are wearing. This selection of information is completed in your mind. Epictetus, 55 – 135 ad noted ‘People are disturbed not by events, but by the view they take of them.’ Extensive research supports the use of CBT for emotional and psychological problems. You too can use CBT. It’s practical, efficient and focuses getting you to a better place. When you can change your thoughts you can change your world.

My experience has thought me that we all wear different lenses on the world.

Imagine if I could scan a person’s brain and take a photocopy of the thoughts of people who experience reoccurrence of the big three emotions of sadness, anger and fear. Here’s what you will find:

* For people who experience sadness their lenses actively ‘filter in or select’ negativity from their past, present and future.

Think about it, do you know someone who experiences sadness, low mood or depression. There is a dominance of negative energy and negative stories.

* For individuals who experience anxiety or fear their lenses actively ‘filter in or select’ threats generally associated with the future.

No doubt you are familiar with someone who experiences fear, panic attacks, and anxiety. Here the person works of the assumption ‘If something bad happens then …. I can’t cope, I can’t escape ….

* Finally, for individuals who experience anger their lenses actively select threat or injustice in their world. ‘It’s unfair why did my Dad leave money to him, I did all the caring’ ……

**The thing is …… You are in charge of the feelings.**

When you are your real self you are independent, self-reliant and accountable. And so you are accountable for your feelings. In the therapy room people say ‘he made me feel bad …… She made me angry …… My boss makes me nervous’ but in reality what really makes us feel and respond the way we do is our thoughts and beliefs about the events. Now that you are going to work on changing your feelings you need to know that no one makes you feel bad. More importantly you can become contented and fulfilled by changing the beliefs that cause you stress, fear, anger and sadness.

**The 5 Hats of CBT**

A good way of thinking about the CBT model is to think of 5 interlinking areas or ‘hats’ – Situation, Thought, Feelings, Behaviour, Body (Physical reactions).



**The Situation Hat:** Is the "who, what, when, where, why" elements, it’s the I think they about the difficulties and it includes the environment that you find yourself in and gives rise to the thought.

**The Thoughts Hat:** is the internal chatter that goes on in our heads.

**The Feelings Hat:** Our emotions or mood. Howwe feel.

**The Behaviour Hat:** Our actions, what we do

**The Body (Physical Reactions) Hat:** How our body reacts.

Let’s take a real life example:

Situation: Mary was in town shopping and happened to walk by Anne her good friend, who ignored Mary. Mary put on the different Hats to examine what happened:

**Thoughts** ‘she couldn’t stop for a quick chat, why, I must have upset her, or maybe Anne does not like me anymore’ ‘I know I have been feeling down lately people must think I there is nothing pleasurable about my company. Sure who would want to hang out with me may be Anne is right’

Our thoughts are essential to our emotions

**Feelings**, thinking Anne did not like her Mary feelings were ‘Sad & Rejected’.

Our thoughts/feelings are closely linked to our

**Body** (**Physical reactions)**. Mary feeling sad and rejected, in her body (physical reaction) this is reflected as low energy, downbeat body language, and tearfulness.

Finally,

**Behaviour** - *what we do next from this situation*. Mary, feeling sad and rejected, decided to go home immediately, she was due to see Sean another friend that evening and decided to cancel it. Later that day and happened to phone and Mary did not answer.

As you can see the five hats of CBT all interlink. What is interesting is the Thoughts that Mary had about the Situation, influenced her Feelings, Body, and Behaviours. Imagine in the same situation Mary had different thoughts for example

‘Anne must have been daydreaming, she did not see me at all. She has been worried about her mom who was in hospital recently’

Given this thought how do you think Mary would feel?

**Feelings:** Maryfeelings were now of **‘concern’** for Anne.

**Body:** With these new feelings Mary did notexperience low energy, downbeat body language, and tearfulness.

**Behaviour:** Mary decided to catch up and go over Anne. The stopped and talked. It turned out that Anne was going to the shop and did not see Mary. Anne was in good form. Her mother was discharged from the hospital yesterday. Anne good mood rubbed off on Mary. They decided to go for a cup of coffee.

As you can see how we think about the situation influences our feelings, body and our behaviours. Even from the small situation Mary friendship with Anne may have been permanently damaged compared to the second scenario where Mary’s relationship with Anne was enhanced.

The challenge now is to use the Five Hats of CBT in your life to tackle any negative emotions. By enhancing and up skilling the hats of Thoughts, Body and Behaviours we massively influence our Feelings. In effect this is how we treat the big negative emotions of our lives;

* Stress, worry
* sadness, loss, low mood & depression,
* fear, anxiety, panic attacks,
* unfairness, jealousy anger,
* low confidence, shyness, social anxiety
* low self-esteem, compulsive overeating, guilt, shame

Can you think of an example from your own life? A good way to do this is to think of the last time you had a strong feeling stress, sadness, anger, or fear? Work your way back, put the different hats on and figure out the links between your strong Feelings and the Situation, Thoughts, Body and Behaviours.

**The FEELINGS Hat**

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When you have a series of strong feelings or emotions a useful way to capture them is to imagine putting on your Feelings Hat. Then ask this question. What **one word** describes my feeling?

**Words that describe feelings**

Contented

Happy

Depressed

Guilty

Sad

Overwhelmed

Trapped

Angry

Irritated

Anxious

Relax

Uneasy

Tense

Nervous

Jealous

Uneasy

Panicky

Scared

Calm

Shame

Grief

Worthless

Loss

Alone

Fatigue

Humiliated

Tired

Energised

Real

**The Thoughts Hat**

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**The power of our thoughts**

Imagine your driving your car and you come to red light. You normally stop. Think about the following situation. You’re in the middle of a rough area of the city at 4 AM. No other cars are about. There are a number of people on the street, intoxicated. You come to a red light. Do you stop? In other words attitudes, interpretation and thoughts about the situation determines your behaviour.’

**There are ANTS in your Thought Hat**

When it comes to unhappiness, sadness, fear, low confidence, the heart of this work looks at what keeps these difficulties going in the here and now. The thing is our moods are kept going by continuous automatic negative thoughts (ANTS). This is the internal voice in our head. If our feelings can be captured in ‘one word’ our courts thoughts are like ‘sentences’. Often people mistake CBT with just replacing these ANTS with positive thoughts. No. That is too simplistic. The secret is to target the ANTS and change them to thoughts that are more realistic and balanced. Then it’s about understanding the pattern of these ANTS and the core message they are revealing. It’s then we start tackling that negative core belief.

Imagine these ANTS like a software code. No doubt you have used Facebook, Google, and Amazon now underneath such applications are a set of instructions yes however yet Air Canada or software code. Now when it comes to negative feelings often there is an underlying faulty software code or distorted glasses that exist. I refer to this as crooked thinking. Now here is what we know. Specific thinking patterns are present when we are feeling bad. And crucially this crooked thinking maintains and amplifies these negative feelings.

Common Thinking Errors

Here are the 14 most common types of crooked thinking which lead to feeling bad. *Which of these is contributing to your problems?* Most people have favourites, and readily fall into habitual patterns of thinking. Once you have identified, and named, the biases in your thinking, you are halfway to defeating your bad mood.

1. ***All or Nothing / Black & White thinking*** - Switching from one extreme to another. “If I can’t get this right, I might as well give up altogether.” “If you can say that, then our relationship means nothing at all”. “One mistake ruined the whole think.” “One false move, and the business will crumble.”
2. ***Catastrophising*** – Predicting the worst outcome. If something goes wrong, it will be a disaster. Every twinge is a sign of serious illness, every frown a sign of rejection. “If I make a mistake, I will lose my job.” “I’ll lose control completely.” “My heart is beating so fast I could die.”
3. ***Overgeneralising*** – Assuming that because something happened once, this means it will always happen. “You always forget to do the things I ask.” “I never seem to say the right thing.” “Politicians always tell lies.” “We always do things your way.” “I’m such a fool. I always blow it at the last minute.”
4. ***Exaggerating*** – Giving negative events more importance than they really deserve, and positive events less importance. “I’ll never get over it.” “Any fool should be able to pass a driving test.” “I can’t bear it.” “The way I look, nobody could take me seriously.” “People never enjoy being with me because I’m too shy.”
5. ***Discounting the positive*** – Rejecting the good things as if they did not count (or using a negative filter). “She only said that to make me feel better.” “I could never have done that on my own.” “It’s just that I was lucky.” “I happened to be in the right place at the right time.” “What, this old thing? I bought it at a garage sale.”
6. ***Mind reading***– Believing that you know what others are thinking. “She knows I’ve made a mess of this,” “They all thought I was stupid.” “He doesn’t like me.” “You only say that because you want to get at me.” “They only asked me because they couldn’t find anyone else.
7. ***Predicting the future, or fortune telling*** – “Everything is bound to go wrong.” “I won’t be able to cope on my own.” “I couldn’t face it if something dreadful happened.” “The interview went so badly I know they won’t give me the job.” “It’s no use, I’ll never get it right.” “I’ll never be able to do that sort of thing.”
8. ***Taking things personally*** – “They didn’t ask me because they don’t like me.” “You’re criticising me” (when someone asks you to do something differently). “That waiter just ignores me.” “If they don’t get here it’s because I gave them such bad directions.”
9. ***Taking the blame*** – Taking responsibility when it is not yours. “It’s all my fault.” “Sorry.” “They’d be happier if I’d been a better mother.” “If only I’d done more for ….” “He failed the test because I was so nasty to him last night.”
10. ***Emotional Reasoning –*** Mistaking feelings for facts. “I’m so worried, I know something is going to go wrong.” “I’m sure they’ve had an accident.” “I love her so much she’s bound to respond.” “I don’t care what you say, I just feel the way I do.”
11. ***Name calling*** – “I’m an idiot.” “You’re completely heartless.” “Anybody who could do that must be brain dead.” “I’m stupid.” “I’m bad.”
12. ***Scare mongering*** – “Maybe she’s really ill.” “What if the car breaks down?” “Suppose they can’t do anything about it?” “People do suddenly drop dead – you read about it in the papers..” “Perhaps I’ll fail.” “I couldn’t cope…”
13. ***Wishful thinking*** – Supposing things would be better if they were different. “If only I were ….. younger … thinner … smarter … not the way I am.”
14. ***Should Statements*** – You tell yourself that things *should* be the way you hoped or expected them to be. “Musts,” “oughts” and “have tos” are similar offenders. “Should statements” that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in general lead to anger and frustration: “He shouldn’t be so stubborn and argumentative.” Many people try to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if they were delinquents who had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. “I shouldn’t eat that doughnut.” This usually doesn’t work because all these shoulds and musts make you feel rebellious and you get the urge to do just the opposite.

**POWERING UP YOU THOUGHT HAT**

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When you change your thoughts you change your world. There are a number of strategies to tackling automatic negative thoughts ANTS.

**Thought Strategy 1. Captured the ANTS & Squashed Them**

When you have a strong feeling, identify the feeling and capture the underlying thought that is amplifying this feeling. Search to see if you are engaged in any crooked thinking.

Try this series of questions to squash your ANTS. If possible learn them off so that becomes second nature to you

**20 Powerful Questions to Squash your ANTS**

1. Do I need to stop and take a deep breath?
2. What type of crooked thinking am I engaged in? Am I mistaking thoughts for facts? Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? Am I predicting the future?
3. If my best friend told me they had this thought what advice would I give them?
4. If my best friend new that I was thinking this thought what would they say to me? How would they suggest that my thoughts were not 100% tr are ue?
5. When I am not feeling this way would I think about this situation differently, why?
6. Am I wearing those ‘fear glasses’, our ‘dark glasses’? What would be more realistic if I was not filtering out the positives?
7. What evidence is there this thought is true? What other ways could I think about this situation?
8. The words in my mind are they fact or opinion?
9. Where is my focus on - the past, or the future? How do I need to get into the moment?
10. If it’s not about black or white, then what do I need to do to surf the grey?
11. What would someone else make of this situation?
12. Is my reaction disproportionate to the situation?
13. How important will this situation be in six months time, in one year’s time, in two years time?
14. When I felt this way before, what did I think about or do that help me feel better?
15. What is the most helpful thing I can do in this situation?
16. Am I discounting small things that could contradict my courts?
17. Am I blaming myself for something that I do not have complete control over?
18. Are there any resources and strengths in me that I am ignoring or that I can use?
19. What choices have I got here?
20. What are the consequences of my behaviour? Will these behaviours bring me closer to my real self or further away?

**Thought Strategy 2. The hot air balloon**

In therapy, I often invite the individual to put a book 1 inch from the nose. Try it. Then move the book to arms length. Now if the book is the problem, you can see that when the problem is in front of your face you have little perspective. And when you move the problem to arms length it’s not as overwhelming. We need a way to see the bigger picture. Imagine if you were up in a hot air balloon you are now able to see the bigger picture.



To gain more perspective try asking these questions?

* How would somebody outside of the situation see it?
* What are the different points of view?
* Are there things that we can agree on as well as disagree on?
* What is the wise path me?
* Can I engage in some mindful practice?
* Can I attach the thoughts that are associated with the strong feelings to some passing clouds and let them go?
* If I was to be a coach - what advice would I give to my friend if they were in the situation?
* How can I make my coaching advice more compassionate and confident?
* Can I hold on, focus on what I can control, my breathing and review
* Putting on my BEHAVIOUR -- is there anything I can do now?
* Putting on my BODY hat-- is there anything I can do now?

Gaining perspective helps us to reduce negative emotions and gives us more wisdom and confidence.

**Thought Strategy 3. Bringing your ANTS to Court**

I am a big fan of legal dramas Columbo, Law & Order, the Good Wife, particularly when it comes to the courtroom. Now I am going to invite you to bring your ANTS to court. To assist in the preparation of case you will need a thought record. The thought record is one of the most used tools in CBT to challenge automatic negative thoughts in order to get to a more realistic thoughts and to diffuse the emotion.

Column1. Situation Hat – situation / trigger - what happened? Who, where, when, what?

Column 2. Feelings Hat & Body Hat

– what is the emotion in one word? Rate it from 0% – 100%

- Scan your body, where did I feel the emotion?

Column 3. Thought Hat –

 - what thoughts were going through my mind?

- Were thoughts as images or memory is activated?

 - Write down the ‘hot’ thought – ie. the one that gets to the heart of your feelings.

 -What is the worst thing about this thought?

- What is the worst thing that could happen?

- If these thoughts were true what would they say about me?

Column 4. The Prosecution – evidence that supports the thought

 - what facts support the truthfulness of this thought?

Column 5. The Defence – evidence against the unhelpful helpful thought

 - What evidence indicates that this thought is not completely true?

 - Ask yourself ‘**20 Powerful Questions to Squash your ANTS’**

Column 6. The Judgement - An alternative, balanced and more realistic thought

 - taking into account the evidence for and against the thought write down a more realistic thought. For example what would the view be from the hot air balloon? What advice would you give to your friend if they had this thought?

Column 7. Feelings, Body & Behaviour Hat

– Re rate the feeling from 0% – 100%

- what can I do that will help me in the situation - wisdom, assertiveness, mindfulness, deep breathing etc?

The bottom line is the more thought records you do better. Most often, individuals practice their thought records after the strong emotion has passed by writing them down. It is advised to have multiple copies of the thought record to hand. Have them in your handbag, pocket or electronic versions in your iPad or smartphone. After a period of consistent use you will be able to complete the thought record in your mind without being required to write it down.

Some of the biggest gains I’ve seen therapy are from people who had adopted this particular strategy and incorporated into the daily life. They are able to ‘in real time’ complete thought records in the mind in order to diffuse dominant negative emotions.

**Thought Strategy 4. Using Mindfulness to disengage from the negative thoughts.**

I have covered this in the mindfulness chapter. Remember, your thoughts are not facts you can see them as passing ‘streams of words’ or as if you were sitting on a train looking out at different scenes. Your challenge is to observe rather than engage with these thoughts, images or members. Use the mindful breathing technique. Initially you will be distracted as this is a new skill. Don’t get downhearted, remember the more practice you do, the stronger you will be using the skills.

**Thought Strategy 5. Using Real Self Positive Affirmations**

Underlying this negative thoughts are our core beliefs, that is beliefs we have about ourselves and the world. Real self positive affirmations that ‘sit’ which you allow you to counteract these negative thoughts. I encourage you to choose a number and repeat these daily. Then after a week or so choose another couple. It’s okay if you don’t believe that just now. But as you grow thought your real self these real self positive affirmations will resonate.

1. I am able
2. I am authentic
3. I believe in myself
4. I am strong
5. I am brave, I try new things
6. I’m okay, being okay
7. I have many good qualities … Kind, compassionate, caring, humorous, funny, considerate, thoughtful, open-minded, easy-going, hard-working, positive, motivated, creative, friendly, flexible, dependable etc
8. I am smart
9. I am a good and worthwhile person
10. I am a person of value
11. I am a resilient person
12. I have strengths and resources
13. I like myself and people like me
14. I am in control of my life
15. I make wise decisions
16. My life has meaning and purpose
17. I am aware of the choices I make
18. I love who I have become
19. There is space in my life for love
20. I care about others
21. I have determination
22. I have good helper
23. I am a good listener
24. I am a positive person
25. I am calm
26. I will speak compassionately to myself and others
27. I am healthy
28. I am open to the joy, beauty and harmony of nature
29. I am open to new people and opportunities which will grow my real self
30. I enjoy growing and developing
31. I love and respect myself
32. I am real
33. I am my real self

Sometimes we find it hard to do affirmations. It is a part of self-expression that has been squashed overtime by powerful others. Its not something that the Christian Brothers or nuns were known for in their teaching philosophy. I would like you to ‘think American’ when you do this exercise. Often when it comes to doing interviews I encourage people to ‘think American’ that is the ability to talk up for ourselves it’s not showing off its just saying what we aspire to and we are. So enjoy ‘thinking American’ until your living it as a real self Irish person.

**The BODY Hat**

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Your body is a big ally when it comes to dealing with negative emotions. Taking control and teaching your body to slow down, calm and relax is the key.

**Body Strategy 1: ABDOMINAL DEEP BREATHING**

The is the first and most important body strategy. It counteracts the ‘fight and flight response’ and puts you in control and centers you. Start by, put one hand on your stomach, this rises and the other hand on your chest, this should move very little. Most people struggle to get their breaths down to the abdomen, that’s why it takes practice. Breathe deeply from the abdomen through an open mouth in for 5 seconds, hold for 5 seconds and breathe out 5 seconds repeat for 10 minutes.

Do you know when you panic you hyperventilate. Abdominal breathing is a powerful antidote to panic.

I am going to list the other body strategies that you can use (You will find them discussed more fully in the appropriate chapters).

Body Strategy 2: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Body Strategy 3: Body Scan & Mindful Meditation

Body Strategy 3: Tai Chi and Yoga

Having a relaxation tool in your back pocket can help you in tackling stress, anxiety, worry, panic and fears. The more you practice it then you can bring it on, when needed.

**The BEHAVIOUR Hat**

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We are now into the action phase of CBT. The behavioural side of CBT often gets ignored, yet it has so much to offer. There are a number of key strategies that we can use

**Behaviour Strategy 1; The Action Precedes the Feeling = Just Do It**

Here is one fundamental finding from over 125 years of psychological science.

*‘You can act your way into a feeling but you can’t feel your way into an act.’*

Unpackaged, this means that you can wait and wait for the feeling to do something. Take for example you are waiting for the feeling to go for a walk or make that phone call that you have been putting off. The problem is this feeling may not come. You don’t get a walk or to make that call. You don’t get all the benefits – fresh air, potential company, in touch with nature, release of natural endorphins, physical benefits, or resolution of some conflict. Essentially if you are waiting for the feeling to do something your problems get more and more entrenched. Now, if you do the action, even when you don’t want to, the positive feelings will come. How many times have you gone out on a night or to the gym when you didn’t want to? When you reflect back you will find more positives than negatives. So if there is something you need to do, a phone call, a conversation, exercise – don’t wait for the feeling, just do it. Don’t over analyse things, the bottom line is - *‘actions create possibilities’.*

**Behaviour Strategy 2; Behavioural Activation = Get up and Going**

Behavioural activation means increasing your activity levels to shift your motivation and mood. Indeed behavioural activation has been shown to tackle mild to moderate depression on its own. If you are having difficulties in motivation and have lost interest in the things you used to do, such as in depression, this leads to a vicious cycle where you do less and less. The idea of getting you up and going is to

* make you feel better about yourself
* increases your motivation
* give you more energy and a healthy appetite
* helps you think more clearly
* provides opportunities for pleasurable activities and being with people
* helps us to have achievements no matter how small
* shifts are thinking to more encouraging thoughts, ‘ today I achieved doing ……’.

You are invited to us the ‘GET UP AND GO LOG’ and follow these steps

* Step 1: At the beginning of the week plan out a small number of activities each day that will bring you pleasure, give you connection with people and a sense of achievement.
* Step 2: Write down the day and time you aim to achieve them. Plan one hour a day at first and gradually increase your levels over a number of weeks.
* Step 3: Choose activities that are important to you. Balance pleasurable activities with ones less enjoyable. But in some rest periods.
* Step 4. Set achievable activities – Aim to walk for 10 minutes on three days. Mow a proportion of the garden rather than deciding to more, weed the whole garden.
* Step 5. Praise and reward yourself on your achievements no matter small you think they may be.
* Step 6. Step by small step at a time, we are aiming to build success, not failure.
* Step 7: Keep your ‘Get up & Go Log’ so you can monitor your overall progress
* Step 8: at the end of the week reflect on your ‘Get up & Go Log’ ask yourself what went well? What could I do differently? If something didn’t happen was that outside of your control? Or did you set too high a target? Did I learn anything? What would you say to your friend if they did not achieve a particular activity?
* Step 9 – Golden Rule if you have scheduled an activity, even if you don’t feel like doing it, do it for a first five minutes and then make a choice on whether to stop.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 9-10 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10-11 |  | Rang Tom  |  | Read Paper 20minsA = 30P = 20 |  |  |  |
| 11-12 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12-1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1-2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2-3 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3-4 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4-5 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5-6 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6-7 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7-8 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8-9 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

On completing each activity score your feeling of achievement and pleasure using the following scales:

Achievement (A = the sense of achievement you felt)

0% – 10% – 20% – 30% – 40% – 50% – 60% – 70% – 80% – 90% – 100%

None moderate complete

Pleasure (P = the amount of pleasure you gained)

0% – 10% – 20% – 30% – 40% – 50% – 60% – 70% – 80% – 90% – 100%

None moderate complete

**Behaviour Strategy 3; Physical Exercise**

There is significant evidence to support the role of physical exercise in tackling negative states. Three to Four 30 minute sessions of sustained physical activity, walking, jogging, running, cycling or swimming releases endorphins, our natural ‘happy’ or ‘anti–depressant’ hormone. I’ve met many people who use this strategy alone to tackle anxiety and depression and are successful. On one hand I applaud and cheer on these efforts. Yet on the other hand I have concerns if the person is only using one strategy what happens if they are unable to train due to illness or injury? Physical exercise is a critical behavioural strategy however you need more than one arrow for your bow. The more arrows you have the more strategies you have to tackle negative emotions.

**Behaviour Strategy 4; Facing Your Fears Step by Step = Graded Exposure**

Research evidence demonstrates that graded exposure is essential tool in tackling fears, panic, and anxiety. Graded exposure is the strategy used in CBT to tackle the most common behaviour associated with fear that is avoidance. If I got a €1 for every time I have told the client this phrase Avoidance will always keep your problems going. It’s true. If you imagine your fear like a muscle then avoidance feeds your fear muscle and makes it stronger. Taking avoidance out of your life weakens this muscle until it no longer has a grip on you. Avoidance has a number of close cousins, reassurance seeking, safety behaviours, escaping, compulsions and checking behaviours. All of these give a short-term fix in reducing anxiety. All of these are fear muscle enhancers. This short-term fix is like a powerful drug because it gives temporary relief people tend to do it again and again rather than facing the fears.



Instead of using avoidance or as close cousins you with new skills, of thinking, breathing and behavioural tools will be able to banish distressing fear and anxiety from your life. This I know. I promise you. I have used these tools to banish panic attacks from people’s lives.

Exposure therapy breaks this cycle that only makes your fear stronger. Here is the thing when you **face** your fear (people place and things) and **stay in** the situation your fear / anxiety will fall. And here is another law of psychology the more often you do this your anxiety will reduce faster. The reality is because you have not stayed in the feared situation you not learnt this. More importantly the more often you do the opposite of what builds your fear muscle you will weaken it can you were in control of your life. So there you are three components of graded exposure - it’s gradual (step-by-step), it’s prolonged (1 hour per day), and it’s done regularly (1-3 times a day). I will discuss this further in the chapter on fear, anxiety and panic attacks and the other chapter on shyness, low confidence and social anxiety as bespoke graded exposure is required.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Behaviour that strengthens your fear muscle** | **Behaviour that we can your fear muscle** |
| Avoidance  | Face Fear  |
| Safety Behaviours | No safety behaviours |
| reassuring seeking | No reassurance seeking |
| Escaping | Staying in - no escaping |
| Compulsions | Not engaging in compulsive behaviours |

## Using ‘The Ladder of Freedom & Success’ to Banish Your Fears

Let’s get started and take Sharon’s panic and agoraphobia as an example;

Sharon, 34 she is a mom of two young children and six and four. Fear dominates from life. She is the of panic attacks and is scared of going out in case she loses control. Sharon’s life has gone small. Before her children she was independent and fun loving. Now she is crippled with fear and panic attacks.

## Step 1; Make a list & then Rank the level of anxiety from 0% - 100%.

## List all the things that make you anxious, avoid, escape, or that you think you will panic in, or that you will only confront if you were using a ‘safety behaviour’ for example being with somebody. Now that you have made your list rate the level of anxiety from 0% - 100%. Where 100% is the most anxious you have ever felt and 0 is the most relaxed you have ever felt.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sharon’s list | **Predicted anxiety -** Rank from 0% –– 25% –– 50% –– 75% –– 100%Relaxed Most Anxious  |
| travelling on a planetravelling on a traintaking on responsibilitiesminding other people’s childrentaking a long walk in a woodvisiting my mothergoing on a busgoing to local shopbringing the children to schoolgoing to cinemagoing to churchgoing to a busy shopping centre | 956080757035654540555080 |

**Step 2: Build Your Unique ‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’**

Once you have completed this, rearrange the items on your list onto your ‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’ with the least anxiety provoking at the bottom and the most anxiety provoking at the top.

**‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’**

|  |
| --- |
| travelling on a plane  |
| going to a busy shopping centre |
| taking on responsibilities  |
| minding other people’s children  |
| taking a long walk in a wood |
| Travelling on a bus |
| travelling on a train  |
| going to cinema |
| going to church |
| going to local shop  |
| bringing the children to school  |
| visiting my mother |

**Step 3: Take the first steps on your ‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’**

Now that you have completed your list from Low to High, start by confronting the first item on it as soon as possible. Here is the thing

* Expect your anxiety to rise when you face your fear. This is normal.
* Use your Abdominal Breathing tool - Breathe in 5 Seconds – Hold for 5 Seconds - Breathe out for 5 Seconds
* Tell yourself ‘that you are facing your fear, that you no longer accept fear as part of your life, that you are going to weaken this fear muscle by facing your fears, that you are brave and you are going to live a life of freedom from fear’
* Expect your anxiety to fall the longer you stay in the situation
* Scoring your anxiety from 0% - 100% during the task.
* Stay in the situation until your anxiety reduces by at least half. For example, if your anxiety rises to 50 during an exposure task, you should remain in the situation until it reduces to 25 or (preferably) less. The amount of time this takes will probably vary from task to task. It may take anything up to 30 - 45 minutes, but commonly happens more quickly.
* Remind yourself that symptoms you are experiencing are as a result of the ‘fight and flight’ hormone of adrenaline that is being released. Remind yourself that your abdominal breathing exercise will reduce the adrenaline flow and give you control.
* Remind yourself that even though you may feel unpleasant, that there is no danger and these feelings will gradually pass if you stay in the situation.
* Tell yourself ‘I can do this, that I deserve life free from fear, and I will have that life.

**Step 4: Repeat your steps on your ‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’ often**



Now that you have completed the exposure task once, the next step is to it again. Repetition is the key. Confronting your fears over and over again weakens your fear muscle and strengthens your muscles of success and control. You will find that each time you confront the item on your hierarchy, it will become easier. Ideally you need to confront your fears daily. The bottom line is the more often you expose yourself to an item on your ladder, the quicker you will overcome your fear towards it.

**Step 5: Moving Up your ‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’**



Now that you have overcome the first step of your ladder you need to follow the same steps as you go up your ladder. With frequent practice and exposure your confidence will grow. All you need to focus is on the particular step that you are on at that moment. Don’t get overwhelmed by what’s at the top of the ladder. You are doing this step-by-step. If you are struggling on a particular task build in an extra step or two on your ladder. For example you might try to do a task with a trusted friend in the first instance. I have often done therapy, sitting in cars, buses, going to the airport, on planes, walking down towns, in bars, in football stadiums where somebody had a belief they were going to have a panic attack as they confronting their fears. I always believe you can overcome your panic and fears.

Then the person is asked to do the task themselves. And they do. Don’t forget to praise yourself for your success.

Here’s a blank form for you to fill out

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| List all the things that make you anxious, avoid, escape, or that you think you will panic in, or that you will only confront if you were using a ‘safety behaviour’ for example being with somebody.  | **Predicted anxiety -** Rank from 0% –– 25% –– 50% –– 75% –– 100%Relaxed Most Anxious  |
|  |  |

Here’s a blank **‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’** for you to fill out

**‘Ladder of Freedom & Success’**

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I have used graded exposure over many years in many different situations to help individuals overcome phobias - dogs and spiders, fear of flying, many forms of anxiety, agoraphobia, panic attacks, social anxiety. A modified version of this is used in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder called Exposure and Response prevention ERP.

**Your building blocks to becoming your real self.**

CBT has proven itself to be one of the most effective therapies. Remember you do not need to be experiencing a clinical issue such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks to avail of these powerful tools. No. The tools of CBT are useful for everyone. For some they will help maintain their well-being. For others they can use the tools to move from Indeed by putting on your feeling chronically dissatisfied to that of positive emotions of joy, contented, authentic, with flowing zest and vitality. In essence they can be your building blocks to becoming your real self.