

Getting Started With Find a Five Exposure

Now that we understand the principles of the Find a Five model, how can we practice exposing ourselves to fear of social situations while keeping the fear at that manageable 5 out of 10 level? Let's look at the practical steps that will be involved, and finish with a couple of examples of what it might look like to use Find a Five exposure to treat social anxiety.

Developing a list of the Feared Situations

The first step is to come up with a list of the situations you fear. Write down as many as you can think of, including a mixture of all kinds of situations. Include a mix of situations (or parts or components of situations) which you feel you could cope with now and some which you think you would not be able to manage right now. In other words you need a mix of situations that you feel would cause you different levels of fear on the 10 point scale. A situation like talking in front of a large group of people, for example, may feel like a 10 right now. However, you will only be engaging with the situation at a 5 out of 10 level of anxiety and therefore you will be engaging even with your biggest fears in a bite sized way. At this stage we are just brainstorming everything we can think of related to our feared situations.

You should also be sure to include situations which are important to you - situations that would have a big impact on your life if you were able to face them unafraid. If being able to talk to certain people or go to certain places would really help improve your day to day life then be sure to include them in this list.

Take your time with this and come up with as thorough a list as you can as we will be referring to this list for the rest of the program. If you are struggling to come up with a good list then ask those around you who might have seen your fear and notices specific situations that make you afraid.

Identifying Factors That Influence Your Fear

Next you need to think about the factors within a situation that would make them more or less scary for you. These factors can include things like:

- How many other people are around
- Whether you know the people or not
- What you are doing
- Whether you are indoors or outdoors
- What you are wearing
- Having a supportive friend with you
- Whether you can easily get out if you feel uncomfortable
- Your physical sensations (eg. feeling hot, cold, light-headed or trembling)
- Where you are looking
- How much noise there is

Think of factors along these lines which might alter the situation by either making it more frightening or less. Come up with some modified examples to add to your list, like this:

Original Item	Modified Item
Being in a classroom	Sitting in class with 30 other students, some of whom I know, while we are working quietly

Talking on the phone	Calling up a restaurant to ask about opening hours, while sat in my living room
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Regulating your fear

When doing find a five we need to constantly check in with ourselves and modify what we are doing to stay at the 5 level of anxiety. If we start to slide up to the 7s or 8s (ie driving our car at 150 to 180km an hour on the highway) we need to back off or have a break until we return to the 5 zone. So if you are in a social situation and feel your fear rising above a 5 then you can either find a way to relax (such as sitting down and breathing slowly for a few moments) or you can leave the situation.

Likewise, if we start to drift down to the 3 or 2 level (ie drive our car at 20 or 30 km an hour on the highway) we nudge up our engagement until we return to the 5 zone. This could look like taking a step towards the group of people talking, or finding other ways to increase the amount of fear you're experiencing until you're back in the magic 5 out of 10 zone.

Goal Setting

Now let's think about what you want to get out of your exposure program. This can be the fun part! Imagine how you want life to look without social anxiety, and what activities you want to be able to enjoy.

Include some goals that are very specific in terms of the situation and the timeframe. Think about what you would like to be able to do a week from now, a month from now and a year from now. Hold these goals in your head when the exposure exercises get tough or if you experience setbacks. Picture how much better your life will be when you are no longer afraid of social situations, and how much more you will be able to do.

Find a Helper

Finding someone to help you through the process is a great way of making the whole thing easier. This can be your spouse, a family member, a close friend, or anyone you trust to support you and who can commit the time needed to help you.

Your helper ideally needs to be someone who can understand the concepts of how to overcome social anxiety and has the patience and sensitivity to support you through each step. Obviously, they also need to be someone who has no excessive social anxiety themselves and won't make you stressed or anxious by being there.

Your helper can assist with the practical details of finding and getting to locations and offer emotional support during the exercises. Having someone you trust to help you come up with your list of feared situations and help you through confronting each one can make the process less daunting for you, but don't worry if you can't find someone who is always available to help- the process can be undertaken alone.

Locating Situations Where You Can Practice

Now let's think about where you can practice exposure. You will need to think of places that specifically trigger feelings of fear, but you also need to consider practical details like ease of access, distance and opening hours. Here are some suggestions for specific locations and situations:

- Busy social spaces with lots of people, such as shopping centres

- Busy streets
- School playgrounds
- Parties and social gatherings
- Speaking to a member of staff at a shop or restaurant
- Calling someone on the phone

When selecting your locations remember that you will ideally be practicing several times a week so they need to be easy to access. Obviously, you don't want to be doing anything that actually poses a danger or that uses areas of public spaces which you wouldn't normally be allowed access to.

Practicing Different Situations

You need to find several locations in which you can practice. Staying solely in one location means that you may find your fear is only affected in that one area. Practicing only in one restaurant or shopping centre would likely lead to being less afraid of that particular place but it might not lead to the same result elsewhere. Why? Different locations of water have different features – size, how busy they are, how easy they are to get into and out of, how noisy they are, how familiar they are to you, and so on. These seemingly unimportant variables might have some effect on your levels of fear, so it is important to expose yourself to as many different varieties as you can.

What to Expect

Starting your exposure program might feel a bit daunting, but the best thing to do is to just go for it and get started. Your first few exercises will probably be tiring and can be quite scary. You may even feel that your anxiety gets worse temporarily. Don't be alarmed by this - you are on the path to recovery, part of which involves facing situations you might have been avoiding for a long time.

Think of exposure like physical exercise- it will be a little challenging at first but the more you do it, the more your ability increases and the easier it gets. Little and often is the key - doing short exposure exercises 5 times a week is better than doing 1 major session once a week. Don't worry if on some occasions you have to end the session early due to hitting your 5 out of 10 earlier than you thought, or if you reach a 5 earlier on one occasion than you did previously. Remember that so long as you continue to reach 5 out of 10, whatever that looks like, the exercise was a success. If your anxiety increases above a 5 out of 10 while you are doing exposures you can always back off and have a break until your anxiety is reduced to below a five and try again later.

We recommend that you undertake exposure practice at least 3 to 5 times per week until you feel a significant decrease in anxiety. The best approach is to use a mix of both planned exposures and improvised ones that just present themselves to you in day to day life. Research has shown that incorporating improvised or "in the moment" exposures can have a powerful effect in reducing your fears even faster over time.

Bringing the Summit to You

As you go on with the process you will find that your fear of being in social situations will decrease. This means you will have to keep increasing the intensity of what you expose yourself to in order to keep reaching a 5 on the fear scale. Just looking at a big gathering of people might be a 5 at the start of the process, whereas a few weeks down the line you might be able to spend ten minutes talking to them before you even reach a 3. Eventually, clients find that they have a lot of difficulty even reaching a 5 doing all the things they want to do that involve social situations. The idea here is that you are not climbing a mountain where it gets progressively harder- you are waiting for the summit to slowly come down to you. It's similar to a gym program where on the first day of the program you are lifting

relatively light weights and feel a little sore. In three months you are still feeling a little sore after a session but you now notice that you are lifting 5 times the weight you did on your first session without it feeling any harder. Your ability to face social situations will increase naturally as you keep hitting the 5 out of 10 mark until eventually there are *no* more situations that take your fear this high.

Examples: The Find a Five Principle in Action

Let's look at how the find a 5 principle might work using our examples from the beginning of the guide.

Case Illustration 1: Callum

Callum was a 16-year old student who had been fearful of social situations since he was a child or perhaps even earlier. For most of his life he had avoided large gatherings of people and was especially afraid of eating in public. When he began using the find a 5 exposure program his list of feared situations included standing in the school playground, talking to his teachers and eating lunch in the school canteen. Callum decided that the first place he would practice would be in the school canteen during lunch break.

On his first visit to the canteen he felt very nervous and reached a 5 out of 10 as soon as the door to the room was opened. He immediately shut the door again and went and relaxed in a quiet room for a few minutes until it was back down to a 0. Callum then felt ready to try again, opening the door and reaching a 5 out of 10 fear level almost immediately when confronted with the noise and busyness of the canteen. He stayed where he was, looking at the tables of students eating, feeling this 5 out of 10 fear level, for a few minutes, before closing the door again. He then decided to end the exercise for the day.

On the next day Callum was still in the hallway when an image of himself getting told off by a teacher entered his mind and caused his fear to spike to a 7. After a moment he calmed down to a 5 and decided to end the exercise. The next day he returned and was able to step into the canteen and get a good look

at the tables before his fear reached a 5. Taking a step closer did not change his fear but getting any closer caused his fear to rise to a 6, so he backed away again until it subsided. He tried this again several times during that week, reaching a five at around the same point. At this stage he decided he might have more success if he also practiced with a smaller group of people, so decided to visit the school library during afternoon break each day.

Callum felt able to stand in the library, which was much quieter and less busy than the canteen, before reaching a 5 out of 10. At one point his fear rose briefly to a 6, but by taking a quick step back his fear subsided. After a few more attempts on subsequent days he was able to sit down at a table while only feeling a 3 out of 10 fear level, and even worked up the courage to talk to one of the other students there who he knew.

Callum showed rapid improvement from this point and was soon able to walk right into the school canteen without feeling fear above a 5. After a couple more attempts he was able to sit at a table and remain there eating his food without feeling fear above a 3. Encouraged by this success he decided that the next step would be to test his new confidence in other situations.

Case Illustration 2: Caroline

Caroline developed her social anxiety suddenly at age 19 after having a panic attack when being accidentally knocked over in a large crowd of people. Afterwards she felt afraid that she would experience the same feelings of panic if she were to be around large groups of people and so avoided big outdoor areas like parks, streets and shopping centres.

As Caroline started to plan where she would complete her exposure exercises she remembered a nearby park that she used to enjoy walking through on her way to college. Crossing through the park would cut 10 minutes from her daily journey, but it was often busy and full of people so since developing social

anxiety she had taken a different route each day. Being able to visit this park again meant a lot to Caroline so she decided it would be the first place she would practice exposure.

At first she did not want to go to the park in when it was busy and full of people, so she went out early in the morning. On the first day her fear reached a 5 out of 10 when she was a few streets away from the park, so she went home again. The next morning she was even further away when her fear reached a 5, so again she went home, having successfully reached 5 out of 10 and therefore completed the exercise.

Later that day she decided to try again, and this time she was able to walk right up to the park and saw a few people out walking, which caused her fear to reach a 7. She backed away until it was back down to a 5. She made several more attempts that day, each time being able to get a little closer before reaching a 5. So next morning, encouraged by her success, she decided to face the park in full rush hour, with lots of people about. The busyness of the morning meant that Caroline's fear reached a 5 while she was still a few streets from the park, but she found a cafe and sat for twenty minutes until her fear was down to a 1 or 2, and then continued.

As she came into the park she felt her fear was at about a 4, and so continued a little way. A few minutes later she heard a dog splashing in the river, which caused her fear to spike suddenly to a 9 as she recalled the feeling of panic from being pushed to the ground. She took a few steps back and found that this was enough to decrease her fear back down to a 4. After a few more steps forward she hit 5 out of 10 and stopped. She tried calming herself down but after ten minutes her fear was still hovering around a 5 so she went back out of the park and went the long way to college.

The next few days she continued to try and cross the park each morning and evening, sometimes getting further along the river and sometimes having to stop earlier. Sometimes taking a few steps back away from crowds of people or stopping and listening to music while sat on a park bench would lower her fear enough to keep going a little longer, other times she was unable to get her fear back down below 5 so would leave. There was a smaller park area near to where she went to college where students

sometimes gathered. Caroline would practice there during her lunch break, and was soon able to walk around it without much fear at all. After three days of this she managed to walk right along the entire length of the park without feeling fear above a 4. By the end she felt very encouraged by the fact that she had been able to cross the park for the first time since developing her social phobia.

The next morning she did not get as far before hitting a 5 and turning back, but on her walk home she was able to fully cross the park, stopping to relax herself periodically, without her fear rising above a 5. She was so encouraged by this that she decided to try again immediately, walking around the park and coming into contact with lots of people without feeling fear above a 5. She continued going through the park over the next few days until it barely caused her fear to rise above a 1 or a 2. She now felt fully confident in taking this shortcut each day on her way to college, which saved her a lot of time.

Summary

- Exposure works by engaging with the feared situation until you reach a 5 out of 10 level of fear.
- You will not progress in a straight line but should soon see that you can do more or expose yourself to more before you reach the 5 level.
- During the exercises you should stay aware of your fear level and adjust your behaviour to stay at the 5 level.
- Practicing in lots of different situations ensures that you won't "cure" yourself in only one specific context.
- Adding improvised or "in the moment" exposures into the mix can have a powerful effect on making your journey through fear more efficient and effective.

What You Need to Do

Here's a summary of the things you need in order to prepare for your exposure exercises:

- Write a list of feared situations, including a whole range of fear levels and making sure to include those situations which are important to you.
- Identify the factors which modify your fear, either by increasing or decreasing it.
- Set some specific goals for your exposure exercises.
- Find a helper who is willing to support you in your exercises if you feel this will help.
- Think of locations where you can practice exposure
- Start your exposure exercises