EXPOSURE HIERARCHY

Planning Cheat Sheet | CBT beginner reference

A collaborative map of feared situations, arranged into manageable practice steps. Exposure is a learning process, not a test of courage. Use a disorder-specific formulation and clinical judgement.

01 Start with a shared rationale

Explore what the person fears will happen, what they avoid, and which safety behaviours or rituals maintain the fear. Agree a personally meaningful goal; explain that the aim is to learn what happens when the feared situation is approached, not to guarantee that anxiety disappears.

02 Build a graded ladder

Stage	Therapist question	Record
Identify	Which situations, sensations or thoughts are being avoided?	Specific tasks, not broad labels
Predict	What do you expect will happen? How likely does it feel?	Feared outcome and belief (0–100%)
Rate	How difficult does each task feel right now?	Anticipated distress (0–100)
Order	Which manageable step could you start with?	Easier to harder; not necessarily linear
Agree	What support, adaptations and boundaries are needed?	Collaborative plan and review date

03 Choose a first experiment

Select a task linked to the formulation and goal. Specify where, when, duration, prediction, what to notice and how to review. Agree whether any safety behaviour will be reduced and how; do not remove essential safety precautions.

Clinical note

Exposure plans vary by presentation: OCD exposure and response prevention, panic interoceptive work, trauma-focused interventions and social anxiety experiments require different safeguards and rationales. Seek supervision and use the relevant protocol.

BUILD YOUR HIERARCHY

04 Example: speaking up in meetings

Illustrative only: an adult fears, “If I say something, colleagues will think I am foolish.” Ratings are hypothetical and should always be elicited from the client.

Step	Practice task	Distress 0–100	Prediction to test
1	Write down one idea before a small meeting	25	I will have nothing useful to say
2	Ask a factual question in a familiar meeting	40	People will look annoyed
3	Offer one short suggestion in a team meeting	60	Others will judge me
4	Share a viewpoint and allow disagreement	75	I will not cope with criticism

05 Reusable planning grid

Situation / specific practice	Expected difficulty 0–100	Feared prediction	When / review
1. _____	_____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____	_____

06 Before starting: collaborative check

☐ The task is relevant to a shared goal and formulation.
☐ The feared prediction is specific enough to test.
☐ The step is challenging but feasible with consent.
☐ Practical risks, accessibility and support needs are considered.
☐ We know what will be observed and how learning will be recorded.
☐ We have discussed avoidance, reassurance, rituals and safety behaviours where relevant.

Keep the focus on learning

Anxiety may rise, fall or remain high. The useful question is: What did we discover about the prediction and your ability to respond?

REVIEW, ADAPT & CONTINUE

07 Review an exposure attempt

Prompt	Notes
What was the feared prediction?	_____
What did you do, and what happened?	_____
Which safety behaviours or rituals occurred?	_____
What did you learn? What remains uncertain?	_____
What is the next useful step?	_____

08 Troubleshoot without blame

If you notice…	Explore…	Possible adjustment
Task not attempted	Was the step too large, unclear or inaccessible?	Break it down; agree a specific time
Anxiety stayed high	Was success defined only as feeling calm?	Refocus on prediction and learning
Repeated reassurance or rituals	Are these blocking new learning?	Plan gradual response prevention where appropriate
Unexpected result	What else might explain what happened?	Review the formulation; refine the test

09 Quick therapist prompts

“What are you expecting to happen?”
“What would count as useful new information?”
“What did you notice, including anything surprising?”
“What helped you stay with the task?”
“What would make the next step realistic?”

10 Final pocket checklist

☐ Shared goal ☐ Clear prediction ☐ Specific task ☐ Consent and safety ☐ Observe outcome ☐ Review learning ☐ Adjust next step

Remember

The hierarchy is a flexible working map. Progress may be uneven; collaboration and learning matter more than completing steps in order. This educational guide does not replace individual clinical assessment, supervision or specialist protocols.