

# Supporting Children and Young People with Fears



Psychological Service

## **Introduction**

This leaflet is for adults, including parent/s/carer/s, who are supporting children and young people with irrational, disproportionate fears which are impacting upon their lives. It is evidence-based.

*Note: if the child or young person is self-harming or considering suicide, then contact the relevant medical professionals as appropriate. Further guidance for professionals is available in the Lifelines Lanarkshire document (2021).*

## Fear

We experience a range of emotions which have different functions. Fear is a response to threat, whether real or imagined and its purpose is self-protection; fear can help us to keep safe. It has an important role in our survival, both now and in our evolutionary past. A threat is recognised, such as a wild animal, and the body responds to get ready for fight or flight, i.e., to fight the threat or escape the danger. We will also want to avoid the threat in future. Typical responses include: heart rate increasing; breathing rate increasing; a dry mouth; muscle tension; getting sweaty; feeling shaky; butterflies in the stomach (stop digesting food); feeling sick; eyes widening to get a good view; needing the toilet. These changes are the body preparing for fight or flight. The mind is also likely to be concentrating on the threat and it might be difficult to think rationally. Fear can vary in intensity. Fear is unpleasant to feel, and we are inclined to avoid it. However, some people might seek out fear in safe settings, for example watching scary movies or taking roller coaster rides.

Children and young people can have fears about any number of things to varying degrees. These fears might be helping keep them safe, for example, being wary of going down a dark alleyway. We all might have small fears, which make us uncomfortable, but we are able to overcome as required, such as public speaking, having job interviews or going to the dentist. To do this we might rehearse our responses, use breathing exercises or use self-talk among other things. We might recognise the degree of threat is not terrifying and have faith in our ability to cope, albeit while feeling uncomfortable. A degree of fear might motivate us to prepare for a driving theory test or an exam. Feeling uncomfortable while rationally overcoming a fear is an important skill in life. When we are able to overcome a fear, we might feel elation.

Children and young people might not yet have learnt that they can overcome fears where appropriate

## **Fears and unhelpful responses in children and young people**

Sometimes, children and young people might have fears that are more intense than would be appropriate for the threat faced. They are typically **overestimating the threat** and **underestimating their ability to cope** with experiencing the threat. These fears can then start to impact upon their lives in negative ways.

### *Avoidance*

A common response to fear is to avoid the threat. For example, they might be avoiding school through fear and so reducing their opportunities for social development and education. They might be scared of insects and so staying inside on sunny days. By not facing their fears, they do not learn that the threat was not as dangerous as they imagined and/or that they are able to cope far better than they thought they could. Some situations might make one nervous, such as a test, but they are manageable. Avoidance also means that they prevent themselves from developing skills as they have evaded practising them, such as social skills or giving presentations. **Note that avoidance leads to fears growing stronger.**

### *Escape*

In addition to avoidance of fears, children and young people will have a strong urge to escape the threat. They will want to leave the situation when they start to feel the unpleasant sensations associated with fear. Leaving quickly prevents them from experiencing the natural reduction in fear symptoms in the body seen by just being in the situation for long enough and nothing dangerous happening.

### *Safety behaviours*

A further common response to fear seen is that of using safety behaviours. They might do things in a certain way to distract themselves and help them feel safe. In the short term they provide relief but they prevent the fear being overcome. Examples might be: playing with a phone, looking down when in a crowd, gripping things, tensing muscles, closing eyes, carrying a bag to be sick in, having another person with them, checking things, frequently seeking reassurance. Adults give reassurance because they are trying to help but it can help to maintain

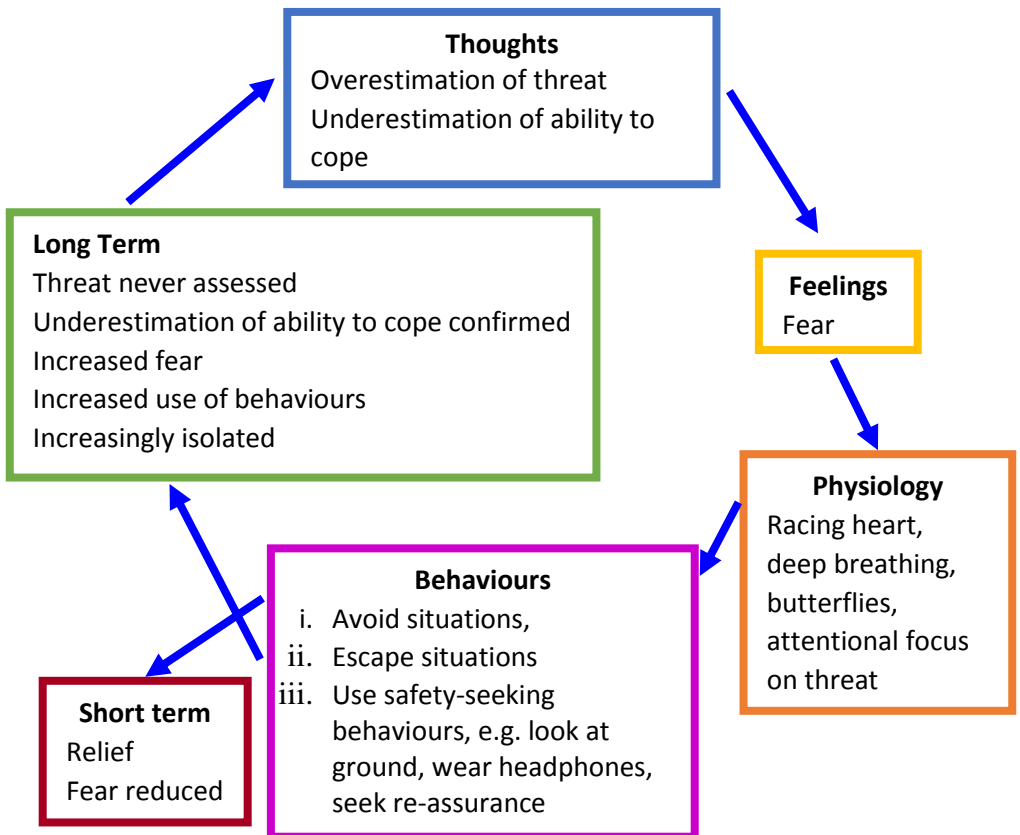
the difficulty; the child or young person is not learning to manage their uncomfortable feelings for themselves. The feared event not happening is put down to the safety behaviours. Consequently, these safety behaviours prevent the child or young person from learning that the threat was not as bad as they thought, and they can actually cope. Cresswell and Willetts (2019) in their book gave a way of thinking about this. Imagine a person is in their garden throwing pieces of paper in the air. The neighbour asks why they are doing this, and they say it is to keep away the dragons. The neighbour points out that there are no dragons. "Exactly," the person replies. Sometimes the things we do to keep safe stop us from learning we are safe already. Rather than simply saying it will be ok, adults can perhaps point out that they have managed it before, and they should give it a go.

If the child or young person has not done the thing before, the adult can say that they think they will be able to manage it. If it doesn't go as well as hoped for then that can be a starting point of what to focus upon next.

### **The Fear Trap**

Howells (2018) devised a way of thinking of fear as a trap which forms a vicious cycle. Children and young people overestimate the threat, underestimate their ability to cope and so the emotion of fear arises. The unpleasant physiological responses in the body, such as a racing heart rate and butterflies in the stomach lead them to avoid or escape from the threat and perhaps use safety behaviours. These give short term relief but mean the child or young person is not able to experience the physiological responses fade as they realise the threat is not as great as feared and that they can cope. Instead, the real size of the threat is not learnt and their inability to cope is 'confirmed'. Therefore, their fear increases, they try harder to avoid or escape the threat and they try or increase their safety behaviours. In relation to fears with a social element, such as school attendance, they become increasingly isolated from their peers. In turn, this leads to an increased sense that they will be unable to cope and of the size of the threat. This is why it is important to respond to irrational fears sooner rather than later, as they will increase in intensity as time goes on if not acted on appropriately. As Howells (2018) put it, "**The only way out of the fear trap is to change behaviour; to do something different**" (p.85).

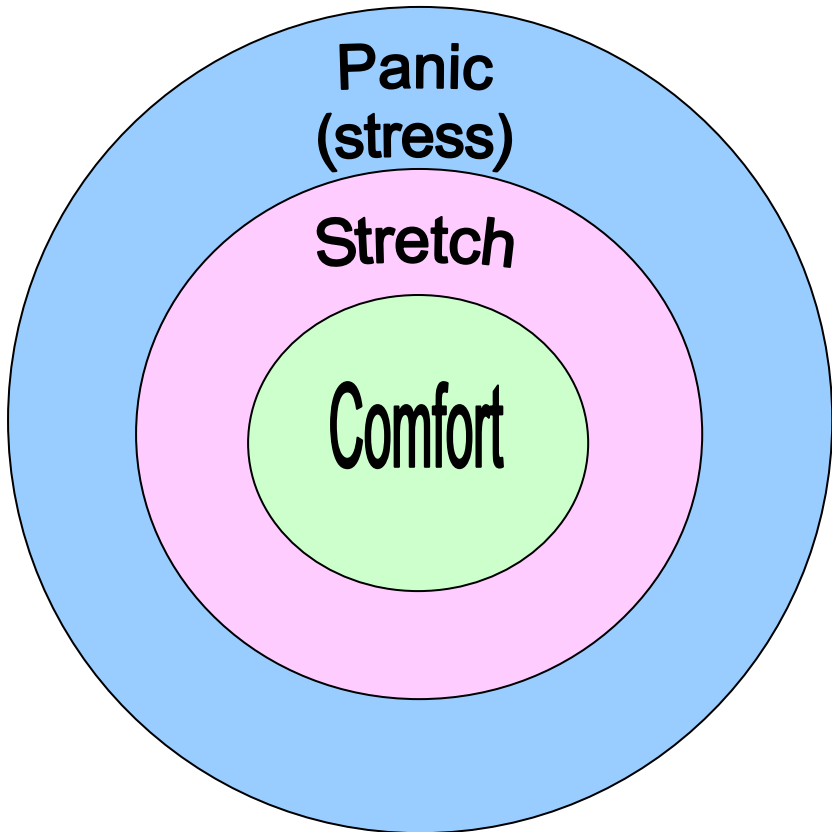
## The Fear Trap



### Comfort, stretch and stress zones

A useful model for explaining fears is the comfort, stretch and stress model of Ryan and Markova (2006). When we are doing something we have done before which does not challenge us and is part of our existing habits, we are in our comfort zone. By contrast, there are activities that overwhelm us and make us panic, they are in our stress zone.

Our fight or flight response will be activated when in the stress zone and we will try to avoid that activity in future. In order to learn, grow and overcome fears we need to concentrate on the stretch zone.

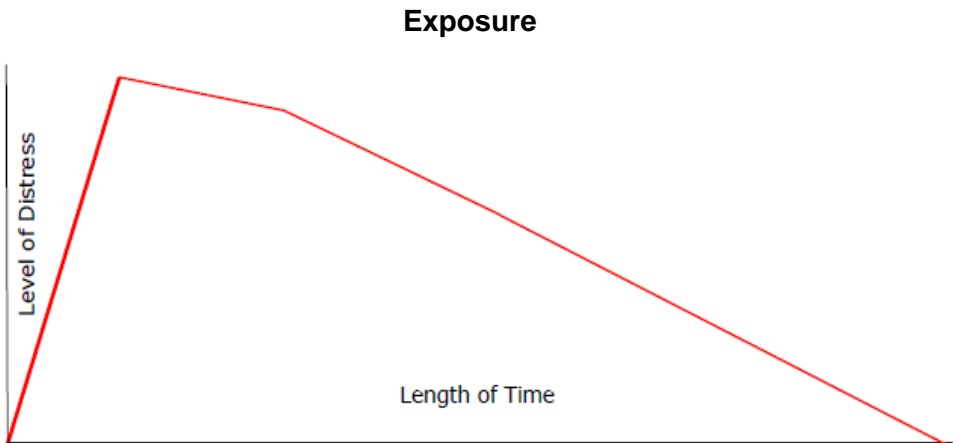


Activities in the stretch zone are uncomfortable and feel awkward, unfamiliar and difficult but they are **manageable with effort**. When we repeatedly perform activities in this area they become part of our new, expanded comfort zone. This means that the stretch zone also expands into areas that were once in the Panic (stress) zone. In other words, it might feel difficult and take effort, but we will now be able to do things that previously terrified us. In time, this will become part of our new, expanded comfort zone.

It can be helpful to share this model with children and young people when thinking about addressing their fears. It shows that to gain improvements the child or young person will need to bear some discomfort, but it will be manageable.

### Exposure and Habituation

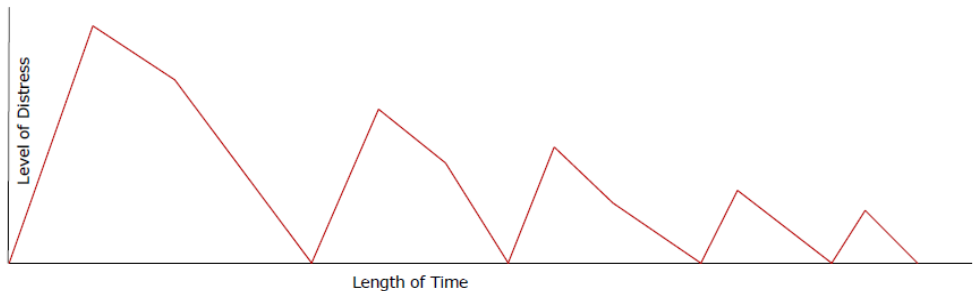
Another way of explain overcoming fear is in terms of exposure and habituation. This is well researched. When we avoid situations because we get too anxious or distressed, if we think about or find ourselves in those situations, our anxiety rises sharply, stays on a level for a while, then slowly starts to decrease gradually *as long as we stay in that situation*. We have to overcome the urge to escape.



If we didn't avoid the situation, just did it anyway and stuck with it, then the first time will be the worst. Each time after that, we'll find that we won't be quite so anxious as the time before, and the anxiety will start to pass a little quicker than the previous time, so the diagram might look something like the figure below. This reduction in the level of fear due to exposure is called habituation.



## Habituation



[www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk)

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Note that if we leave the time too long between the situations the anxiety will begin to creep up again quickly.

### Rating the fear

Children and young people can rate how fearful they feel on a scale of 1 to a hundred, where 100 is very scared indeed and 1 is perfectly calm, just before they faced the threat/s, for example, going into school or seeing a dog or insect. They can do this at the time or through recollection. If a child or young person has a number of fears they can all be rated.

They can rate how they felt 10 minutes after doing the scary activity and an hour later. This will show the reduction for them. It can be repeated to show improvements.

Rating their fear can be helpful in thinking about the steps towards achieving the ultimate goal.

### Effective use of Exposure to allow habituation

When using exposure to reduce fears through habituation there are four principles to follow:

1. *Graded exposure.* The child or young person needs to feel uncomfortable and somewhat fearful for the exposure to work.

However, they should not be terrified. Breaking a goal into steps enables this point to be identified (see the courage ladder below). Responsibility for deciding which tasks are appropriate and not too easy or difficult lies with the child or young person. A good rule of thumb is that it at least 50-60% fear inducing on the rating scale.

2. *Prolonged.* The child or young person needs to stay in the situation with the uncomfortable feelings until the uncomfortable feelings have reduced by roughly a half on their fear rating scale (e.g. gone from 70% to 35%). The amount of time for this to happen will vary between individuals. Being in the situation and their fears not being realised means that the fear rating will drop, provided the child or young person stays with their uncomfortable feelings in the fearful situation. The urge to “escape” may be strong. Leaving the situation before the fear symptoms reduce means that the symptoms don’t reduce, and the person does not get to learn that they can cope, and the situation was not as dangerous as they thought; the feared event did not happen.
3. *Repeated.* Daily practice is best. Repetition is required to ensure that the child or young person does not think it was a one-off. It allows the situation to become part of the child or young person’s newly-expanded comfort zone. This takes time. It is important not to rush to the next step on the ladder too quickly.
4. *Without distractions* (i.e. safety behaviours). Distractions prevent the child or young person from experiencing the physiological responses fade as they realise the threat is not as great as feared and that they can cope. Remember not to give blanket reassurance, rather say that you think they will manage it. However, sometimes distractions might be needed to allow the child or young person to face what might be a very large fear by reducing it to 50 or 50% on the rating scale. A further step on the courage ladder (see below) would be to remove these distractions.

After a child or young person has completed a step ask them how it went. Was their feared prediction of what could happen correct? How did they cope? What have they learned? Reinforce the message of how courageous they have been in facing their fears. They have increased their courage as a consequence.

### **Courage Ladder**

A Courage Ladder (Quick, 2013) is a useful tool to support graded exposure and habituation. Put the highly rated fear at the top of the ladder, examples could be patting a dog or going into classes fulltime at school. Now break that one target down into baby-steps, with the easiest at the bottom of the ladder. This will be a bit uncomfortable but achievable. Ten steps can be helpful in ensuring that the goal is broken down enough, but it may have a smaller number of steps. The steps increase in difficulty up to the top. Since the focus is on children and young people, it can be reinforcing to assign an agreed reward for completion of each step (Cresswell and Willetts, 2019). Similarly, these rewards can increase in favourability with the increasing difficulty of the steps.

It can be helpful to practice a next step in the imagination or to role-play the scenario so the child or young person knows what they will do and/or say. Celebrate success and take time to work through the steps. Repetition is important. Do not go from one step to the next without repetition. If the steps are proving too difficult, re-write the ladder. Add additional steps. It might take more than one ladder to reach the final goal.

### **Possible additional school strategies for fearful school non-attenders**

- Part-time timetable, starting gradually. They do not need to start at the start of the day, try different times, favoured lessons.
- Visit on inset days or after-school.
- Identify a safe space in school. This can be a place to access when required and/or one of the steps on the courage ladder if going into a lesson is too big a step.
- Provide someone to meet them. Work on helping the child or young person to develop a relationship with a member of staff.

- Provide a peer buddy so they have someone to talk to at lunchtimes.
- Maintain friendships outside school.
- Provide a plausible reason to give as to why the child or young person has been off school.

### **Breathing exercise for panic attacks**

If the child or young person is breathing quickly during a panic attack, doing a breathing exercise can ease their symptoms. Suggest they try this:

1. Breathe in as slowly, deeply and gently as you can, through your nose.
2. Breathe out slowly, deeply and gently through your mouth.
3. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five on each in-breath and each out-breath.
4. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.

You should start to feel better in a few minutes. You may feel tired afterwards.

(NHS 21 Scotland)

### **Useful resources**

Cresswell & Willetts (2019). *Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries- a self-help guide for parents*. Little, Brown Book Group.

Clear Fear app <https://www.clearfear.co.uk/>

Lifelines Lanarkshire Partnership (2021). *Lifelines Lanarkshire: Multi-Agency Guidance for working with children and young people who may be at risk of suicide*.

[https://www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/Childprotection/downloads/file/403/lifelines\\_lanarkshire](https://www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/Childprotection/downloads/file/403/lifelines_lanarkshire)

NHS website <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-in-children/>

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