



THERAPY IN A NUTSHELL

Let's Get Better at Feeling!
With Emma McAdam, LMFT
www.TherapyInANutshell.com

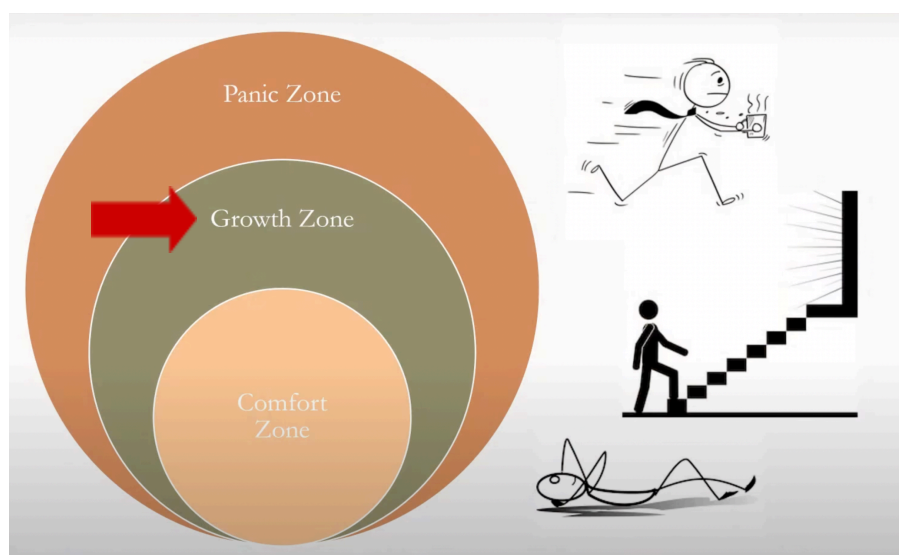
Facing Our Fears

One of the ways to not let our anxiety overwhelm or control us is to learn to develop the skill of facing our fears. But when we hear, "Just face your fear," that sounds too simple a statement and difficult to do. This is a guide to approach our fears and anxiety in a strategic way. One of the obstacles that we face is the assumption that anxiety is bad, and that it is something that we must avoid at all cost. However, this made up assumption is not true. Anxiety is not inherently bad. Yes, it is uncomfortable, but it has a function - it keeps us safe, like staying out of high cliffs, rattle snakes.

However, when we have anxiety disorder, we feel like we are in danger, but in reality we are actually safe. So the challenge for us is to tear down the assumption that anxiety is bad, dangerous, and something we cannot handle. Yes, it is uncomfortably hard, but you and I can do hard things - we can breathe through it and let it pass.

Key Points

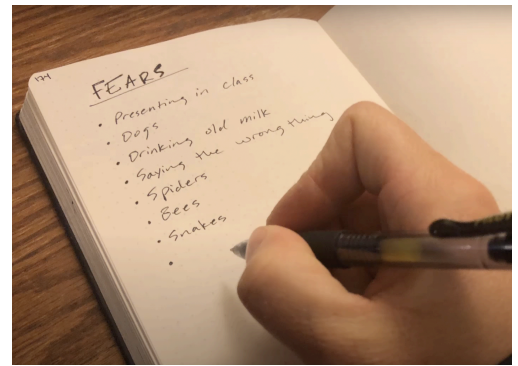
- **Avoidance Fuels Anxiety:** It is normal to avoid things that make us anxious, but avoidance locks our brain into a cycle of increasing anxiety. (See pic on the right). Avoidance prevents us from learning that the things we fear are not as dangerous as we think.
- **Gradual exposure:** A safe and effective gradual process to face our fears and naturally decrease anxiety. It helps us rewire our brain to help it know when we are safe.
- **Two reasons why exposure may not have worked for you in the past:** (1) You jumped into something scary too fast and too soon, which put you in the panic zone, and only caused you to be retraumatized thus reinforcing the fear. (2) You only faced your fears once or twice, and when it bothered you, you did not continue to repeat the exposure.
- **Growth Zone:** But when exposure is done correctly with the help of someone you trust, you can stay in the growth zone, which enables you to stick with it long enough to get lasting results.



THE FEAR LADDER

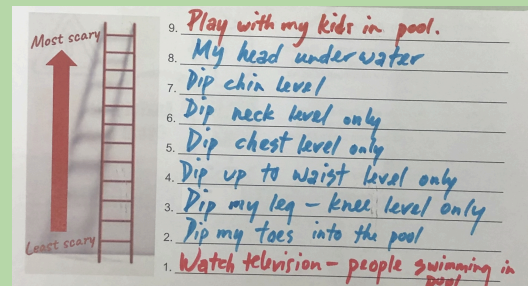
First, list your fears, and then pick a fear that you can work with in the next few weeks. Complete a "fear ladder" for this particular fear.

Start with an action related to the particular fear that you have chosen and gradually work your way up towards things that provoke more intense anxiety. Each rung of the ladder is an action that will eventually get you to your goal. Never jump into the deep end of your fears. This only causes you to be retraumatized, thus increasing even more anxiety. To kick fear's butt, you need to come up with small tiny baby steps. This gradual exposure process will reinforce your belief in your ability to do uncomfortable and hard things. And hopefully learn that you might in fact enjoy some of the things that you once feared.



STEPS:

1. At the top of the ladder next to number 9, put your goal. **For example:** "Swim with my kids: Learning to overcome my fear of pool."
2. At the bottom next to number 1, put the closest thing to your goal that currently doesn't give you anxiety. For example: "Look at a picture or television of people swimming in a swimming pool." Or "Dip my toes into the pool."
3. Gradually build up small steps in between 2 - 8, being careful not to make jumps too big. You don't have to use all 9 slots.



9.	_____
8.	_____
7.	_____
6.	_____
5.	_____
4.	_____
3.	_____
2.	_____
1.	_____

Key points to remember!

- **A companion:** Have someone you trust hold it steady for you. Fear ladders work best when you have someone who knows you are trying it and can check in with.
- **A quick note on self-regulation:** Self-regulation techniques (or coping tools, such as breathing, mindfulness, relaxation techniques) help limit the amount of anxiety that your body will experience, but do not use them as a tool to avoid, which will go against your goal.
- **Repeat, Repeat, Repeat.** Repeat the activity as many times as you need starting at the bottom rung of the ladder. Repeat the specific activity in the rung until the anxiety decreases or no longer triggers you. The reason for this positive change is "**neuroplasticity**" - meaning, if you keep on doing something that your brain interprets as scary, but in reality is safe, your brain will adapt to it eventually and relabel that activity as safe.
- **Reinforce courage:** Don't compare yourself with others. Say an affirmation: "I proud of myself doing hard, uncomfortable things."