

SUDs 0-100 Scale | 12-Week Protocol | 30 Graded Exposures

Social Anxiety Exposure Ladder

SUDs, a 12-Week Hierarchy Builder, and 30 Graded Exposures.

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Before You Start

- Exposure therapy is the gold-standard treatment for social anxiety (APA guidelines).
- Self-guided exposure is effective for mild to moderate cases; severe cases benefit from a therapist.
- You will feel worse before you feel better. Anxiety peaks, then plateaus, then falls (habituation).
- Do not avoid. Do not escape mid-exposure. Escape trains the brain that the feared thing was dangerous.

Exposure therapy is not about forcing yourself to be brave. It is a specific protocol that teaches your nervous system, through repetition, that feared social situations are not dangerous. It works by habituation and inhibitory learning, both well-documented mechanisms. This workbook gives you the same structure a CBT therapist would build with you, plus 30 example exposures you can actually practice this week.

80%

Response Rate to Exposure Therapy

12 wk

Typical Protocol Duration

30+

Repetitions per Exposure



Chapter 1: How Exposure Therapy Works

Your brain learned to fear social situations by associating them with threat. Exposure therapy reverses that learning, not by convincing you the situation is safe (that is cognitive work, and it helps a little), but by letting your body directly learn it is safe through repeated contact.

Two mechanisms

1. Habituation: with repeated exposure, the nervous system response naturally decreases. Anxiety cannot stay peaked indefinitely; physiology prevents it.
2. Inhibitory learning: your brain builds new, competing memories of the situation being safe. The old fear memory is not erased, but it is outvoted.

Why avoidance makes it worse

Every time you avoid or escape a feared situation, the relief reinforces that the thing must have been dangerous. Avoidance is the single biggest reason social anxiety persists. The protocol only works if you stay in the exposure until anxiety drops by at least 50%.

[KEY] The 50% rule

Stay in each exposure until your SUDs score drops by 50% from its peak. This is the minimum; more is better. Leaving before the drop teaches the wrong lesson.



Chapter 2: The SUDs 0-100 Scale

SUDs (Subjective Units of Distress, Joseph Wolpe, 1969) is a 0-100 self-rating of anxiety intensity in the moment. It sounds simple; it is load-bearing. Your whole ladder is calibrated to SUDs.

SUDs	Label	Physical / Mental State
0	None	Completely relaxed
10	Alert	Mild attention, normal baseline
25	Mild	Noticeable, still functional
40	Moderate	Sweating, heart rate up, manageable
55	Notable	Thoughts racing, urge to leave
70	High	Shaking, voice wobble, strong avoid urge
85	Severe	Panic-adjacent, tunnel vision
100	Maximum	Full panic attack

[KEY] Target 40-70 for effective exposure

Below 40, your brain is not engaging the fear system, so it cannot learn. Above 80, you will shut down or escape. The 40-70 band is where inhibitory learning happens.



Chapter 3: Building Your Personal Ladder

A ladder is an ordered list of feared situations, from mildest to worst, rated by SUDs. Your ladder is personal. Use the 30 examples in the next chapter to spark ideas, then customize.

Step 1: Brain-dump your avoided situations

List 15-25 social situations you avoid or endure with significant anxiety. Do not filter for importance; include small ones (making eye contact with a cashier) and large ones (giving a toast at a wedding).

Step 2: Assign anticipated SUDs

For each item, write the SUDs you would expect to feel if you did it right now, unprepared. Do not overthink. First gut number.

Step 3: Sort by SUDs

Sort low to high. The result is your ladder. You want 3-4 items in each SUDs band (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s). If a band is empty, invent an item to fill it; smooth progression matters.

Step 4: Start at SUDs 30-40

Never start at the bottom (too easy, no learning) or the top (you will fail and reinforce avoidance). Start at SUDs 30-40. Once that item drops consistently to under 20 over 3 repetitions, climb one rung.

Example: Example personal ladder (partial)

SUDs Exposure

- 25 Order coffee from a cashier (specific name)
- 35 Ask a stranger for directions
- 45 Return an item to a store without a receipt
- 55 Make a 2-minute phone call to a business
- 65 Introduce self in a small meeting
- 75 Disagree with someone in a meeting
- 85 Give a 5-minute presentation to 10 people



Chapter 4: 30 Graded Exposure Examples

Use these as sparks, not a prescription. Pick the 10-15 that match your life; customize SUDs to your actual anticipated distress.

Lower rung (SUDs 20-40)

1. Say good morning to a neighbor
2. Make 3 seconds of eye contact with a cashier
3. Order coffee using the barista's name
4. Ask a store employee where an item is
5. Hold a door open and say 'have a good one'
6. Compliment a stranger's outfit or dog
7. Ask a stranger for the time (even with your phone visible)
8. Send a text to an acquaintance to initiate plans
9. Return a phone call within 24 hours
10. Raise your hand to answer one question in a class or meeting

Middle rung (SUDs 40-60)

1. Ask a stranger for directions to a nearby address

2. Call a business for hours/info instead of Googling
3. Speak to a clerk about a minor product issue
4. Request a table change at a restaurant
5. Return a purchase with a printed receipt
6. Introduce yourself to a new coworker unprompted
7. Ask a question in a small group meeting
8. Send an email asking for clarification from a senior colleague
9. RSVP yes to a small social event you would normally decline
10. Share a short opinion in a meeting, even if voice shakes

Higher rung (SUDs 60-85)

1. Return an item without a receipt
2. Leave a longer voicemail for a business or professional
3. Make a brief toast at a family dinner
4. Disagree respectfully with a colleague in a meeting
5. Eat alone at a restaurant without a book or phone
6. Ask a senior leader a question at an all-hands
7. Go to a networking event and talk to 3 new people
8. Give feedback to a direct report about performance
9. Deliver a 5-minute presentation to 10 colleagues
10. Host a small gathering (6-8) at your home

Chapter 5: The 12-Week Exposure Hierarchy

12 weeks is not a deadline; it is a pacing framework. Each week targets a specific SUDs band with a minimum rep count. Most people finish the core ladder in 10-14 weeks.

Week	SUDs Target	Reps / Week	Focus
1	20-30	5	Build the habit of exposing
2	20-30	5	Confirm SUDs drops within sessions
3	30-40	4	Add a notable-discomfort rung
4	30-40	4	Introduce phone-call exposures
5	40-50	3-4	Return-item or service exposures
6	40-50	3-4	Small-group speaking, 1 opinion/meeting
7	50-60	3	Social events you would have declined
8	50-60	3	Senior-audience questions in meetings
9	60-70	2-3	Disagreement with a colleague
10	60-70	2-3	Eat alone, networking event
11	70-85	1-2	5-min presentation practice
12	Re-assess + consolida	4-5 varied	Review ladder, drop easier items

Chapter 6: Session Log Template

Log every single exposure. Unlogged exposures do not count; you will remember the hard ones and forget the wins, and the ratio feels hopeless. Data beats memory.

Date	Exposure	Peak SUDs	End SUDs	Drop %	Notes
4/21	Ordered coffee + said barista name	40	15	63%	Heart raced, voice fine
4/21	Asked cashier for bathroom	35	12	66%	Easier than expected
4/22	Phone call to dentist	55	25	55%	Wrote script first
4/23	Returned shirt, no receipt	65	30	54%	Stayed till drop

[TIP] Write the 'Notes' column even when brief

The notes column is where breakthroughs hide. 'Voice shook, nobody noticed' is the exact evidence your brain needs to update its fear prior.

Chapter 7: Anxiety Tracking Charts

Track weekly averages, not daily swings. Daily SUDs bounce; the trend line over 8-12 weeks is where the story is.

Week	Avg Peak SUDs	Avg Drop %	# Exposures	Ladder Rung Reached
1	___	___	___	___
2	___	___	___	___
3	___	___	___	___
4	___	___	___	___
5	___	___	___	___
6	___	___	___	___
7	___	___	___	___
8	___	___	___	___
9	___	___	___	___
10	___	___	___	___
11	___	___	___	___
12	___	___	___	___

Two numbers predict progress: weekly average Peak SUDs should fall over time (the system is habituating), and weekly average Drop % should rise (inhibitory learning is consolidating). If either stalls for 3 weeks, adjust your ladder.

Important Disclaimer

This workbook is educational and not a substitute for therapy. If you experience panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, or significant life impairment, work with a licensed therapist trained in CBT or exposure therapy. Medication (SSRIs) is also an evidence-based option and is discussed with a psychiatrist.

Thank you.

If this helped, we have more.

Social Anxiety Exposure Ladder Workbook

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