

# OVERCOME YOUR FEARS AND GET BACK TO A NEW LIFE ROUTINE



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## YOUR WELLBEING SERVICE IS HERE TO HELP

Recent times have placed limitations on us all! However, as the number of people with COVID-19 goes down, lock-down restrictions are being lifted. Given the impact of the pandemic however, understandably some people become fearful about getting back to a routine. This is especially likely to be common amongst people engaging in some form of shielding given underlying medical conditions.

This evidence-based approach is here to help you address your fears about beginning to get a life-routine back, whilst keeping to the limitations that are still in place. It has been designed for you to work through on your own. At times however, you may find yourself struggling with a specific Step.

### **IF SO, YOU'RE NOT ON YOUR OWN!**

If needed, trained Practitioners at the University of Exeter Wellbeing service with expertise in supporting this approach are ready to offer email support.



***You are in control of the way you choose to work through this workbook.** Therefore, the speed you want to go using the workbook is down to you alongside how you put the techniques you'll learn into practice.*

## THE PROBLEM WITH COVID-19

It's hardly surprising that many people have become slightly fearful being aware of the impact of COVID-19 and having lived their lives according to the restrictions. In fact, this has been no bad thing! Becoming fearful has made people less likely to engage in behaviours considered threatening and avoid them. The result is that most people have been following the COVID-19 restrictions.

By following these restrictions people have been experiencing relief from thoughts about danger they may have been having, alongside unpleasant physical feelings we all experience when afraid such as:

- Racing heart
- Dry throat
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath

All this has resulted in restrictions being very well followed whilst in place. However, as COVID-19 restrictions become lifted, fear associated with returning to normal life routines such as going back to university or work, traveling on a bus or shopping can return. People have now learnt that by continuing to avoid these activities, they can control their unhelpful thoughts and the unwanted physical feelings.

*A 'vicious cycle of fear and avoidance' has now been established as people start to consider getting back to a new routine.*



As COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, this approach will help you confront your fears and break the 'vicious cycle' at a pace suitable for you. The result can be that you feel back in control of your fears and be better able to manage new fears that arise as restrictions are further lifted.

## HELPFUL TIPS

Before you get started, sharing some tips may be helpful. Many of these have come from people that have used these approaches before.

### Give it your best shot

Because you will not have experienced the demands imposed on you by COVID-19 before, you may initially struggle with this approach. But just give it your best shot. That's all anyone, including yourself, can ask.

### Expect to have good and bad days

After using the approach for a little time, hopefully you will notice yourself better able to engage with more activities as limitations continue to be lifted. However, as is normal, you will have good and not so good days. This is all to be expected, but on occasions like this the University Wellbeing service can help.

### Follow the rules

Try to follow the rules as you work through this approach. At times you may begin to feel so thrilled you've achieved another activity with little fear that you immediately want to engage with another. This would be great! To reduce the likelihood of a 'set-back' however, ensure you follow the tried and tested rules.

### Maintain COVID-19 restrictions

Following lock-down, more and more restrictions are beginning to be lifted. However, these are being lifted a few at a time. So, as you achieve more activities also ensure you do so in a way that remains consistent with restrictions that are still in place.

### Involve family and friends

Given the limitations of COVID-19, you may be using this approach from home, either because you have been so fearful to engage in activities even as restrictions begin to be lifted or have been self-isolating. If this is the case having others initially support you with this approach may be helpful. They may be able to encourage you if struggling, help you find ways to solve problems or may even take part in some of the activities. Given continued limitations imposed by COVID-19, it may be you can't ask for advice face-to-face, but you could consider using the telephone or having a video chat.

### Ask for help

Although designed to be used on your own, if you find yourself struggling then please send your Wellbeing Practitioner an email ([welfare@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:welfare@exeter.ac.uk)), being as specific as possible about the problem you've experienced. They'll get back and provide specific advice on ways to overcome any difficulties.

## OVERCOME YOUR FEARS AND GET BACK TO A NEW LIFE ROUTINE

Following 4 simple rules can help you overcome your fears:

RULE 1: Graded

RULE 2: Prolonged

RULE 3: Repeated

RULE 4: Without Distraction

### RULE 1: GRADED

Rate activities you want to get back to in terms of the fear they cause you (even if you'd rather not!)

As COVID-19 limitations are lifted, think about the range of activities you **want to** or **need to** get back to doing.

#### WHAT TO DO

- Rate each activity between 0–100 in terms of how much fear you anticipate it will cause.
- Write the activity causing you most fear at the top of your [RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER WORKSHEET](#) then grade following activities in terms of the fear level, putting those causing least fear at the bottom.
- Select the single activity you think you could manage to begin to engage with.
- Now make a plan to begin to engage with it.

## IMPORTANT POINTS

- Don't separate activities in the ladder in terms of time.
- It's very important your fear drops by 50% before stopping the activity.
- As far as possible ensure all activities chosen are anticipated to cause you at least 50% fear at the start of the engagement exercise.
- Add those causing at least 50% fear to the bottom of your ladder.
- Remember you're learning a new skill with this approach.
- It may continue to be helpful when all restrictions are lifted
- You need to keep within COVID-19 restrictions still in place at all times.
- As restrictions lift, you can always return to this approach to engage with activities you are now able to do.





# RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER WORKSHEET

Previously restricted activity you want to get back to:		
Fear Rating	Activity Hierarchy	Anticipated Fear Rating (0–100)
Most Fear		
Medium Fear		
Least Fear (should rate at least 50)		

Fear Rating				
0 No Fear	25 Mild	50 Moderate	75 Severe	100 Very Severe

## RULE 2: PROLONGED

Engage with the activity (even if you want to run away!)

As you begin to engage with a single activity you've selected, you may want to 'run away', and those dreadful feelings will go away! In the short term great! However, you're still likely to have to engage with the activity at some point. So best try and get it out the way now!

### WHAT TO DO

- Informed by Rule 1, work your way up from activities listed at the bottom of the Restrictions Being Lifted Ladder at a manageable rate for you.
- Write the activity at the top of the [ENGAGING WITH MY ACTIVITY WORKSHEET](#)
- Consider your level of fear and write it on the worksheet:
  - As you begin to prepare to engage with the activity
  - At the start of engagement
  - At the end of engagement
- Engage with each activity individually, until your level of fear has dropped by at least 50% of the rating given at the start of the engagement exercise.
- Write how long it took your fear to drop by 50%.
- If you noticed anything, write it in the Comments box, it may be helpful for you to look back on.

### IMPORTANT POINTS

- We don't know how long it will take your fear to drop by 50% of the rating you gave it at the start.
- If needed, try to find 'inner strength' to continue to engage with each activity until fear has dropped by 50%
  - Science indicates it will drop!





# ENGAGING WITH MY ACTIVITY WORKSHEET

Engagement Activity:							
Date and time of activity		Engagement Fear Ratings				Minutes	Comments
		Preparation for activity	Start of activity	End of activity	Duration of activity		
	Activity 1						
	Activity 2						
	Activity 3						
	Activity 4						
	Activity 5						
	Activity 6						

Fear Rating				
0 No Fear	25 Mild	50 Moderate	75 Severe	100 Very Severe

## RULE 3: REPEATED

Continue to engage with the activity (even if you don't want to!)

It's great if you've been successful so far and managed to engage with your chosen activity according to the 4 rules. This is what experience tells us will happen if you stick to the rules and hopefully you're learning this for yourself.

### WHAT TO DO

- Repeat engaging with each individual activity written on your [RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER WORKSHEET](#) until the level of fear you identified at the start of engagement with the activity has dropped below 40%.
- When you find yourself easily able to engage with the activity it's time to move up the ladder and on to the next activity.

### IMPORTANT POINTS

- If you find your fear rating has dropped below 40% but you're still struggling with the activity that's fine, just continue with the activity until you feel more comfortable.
- But like us all, we all successfully engage in some activities that cause us some fear from time to time, think about exams or a job interview!
  - So, don't expect no fear, some things in life cause us fear, luckily!



## RULE 4: WITHOUT DISTRACTION

Solely focus on the activity (just in case you can't use distraction in the future!)

At times we're able to engage with activities because we are using distraction techniques. This can be absolutely fine and if they are not, or unlikely to, interfere with you engaging in an activity if you're not using them, fine. However, at times if distraction can't be used, there may be problems. So, you may consider it helpful to engage with the activity without distraction, just in case!

### WHAT TO DO

- Identify anything that helps you distract yourself and reduce fear when doing an activity.
  - These will be highly individual but may include things such as only going places with a friend, seeking reassurance, playing with your phone etc.
- To ensure you break your 'vicious cycle' you may need to ensure that anything used as a distraction is no longer relied upon to distract you.
- If you believe it's too hard to drop a distraction at first this is fine.
  - As long as the activity with distraction is still anticipated to cause you at least 50% fear when starting to engage with it, write it in your [RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER](#).

### IMPORTANT POINTS

- If using a distraction with any activity in your [RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER](#), rate it again with the distraction removed, likely placing it higher in the *Ladder*.

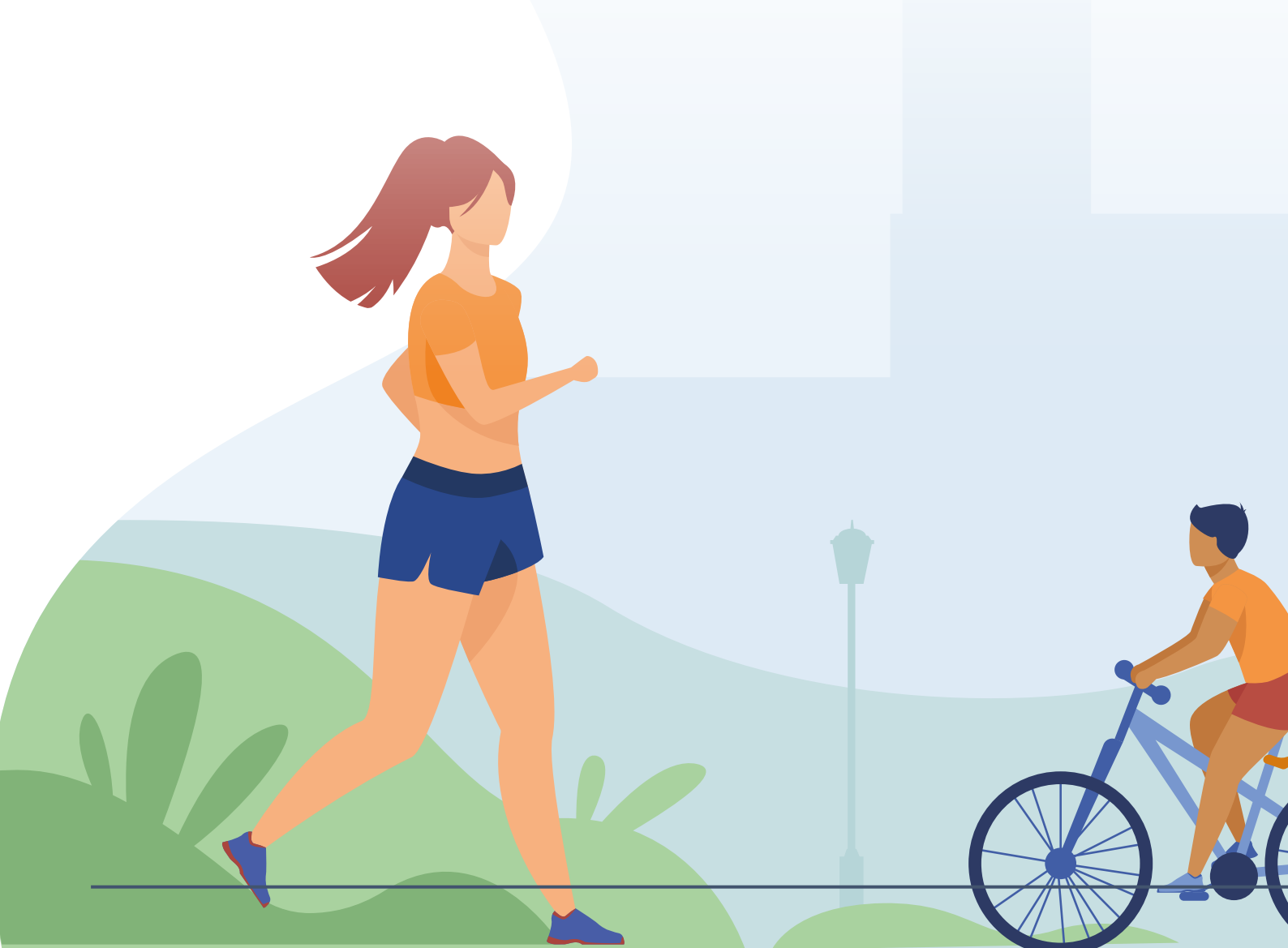
## GIVE IT A GO!

Keep using this approach to work your way to the top of your ladder. You may find that as you move up the ladder your fear level has dropped. If so, great! Consider if you need to go through the approach for the activity at that level again, or if you're much happier doing the activity, maybe you'd like to consider moving up the ladder. This is up to you, just make sure all the rules are followed.

As more restrictions get lifted you may find there are new activities you need to begin to do once again, and these cause you fear. If this is the case, just create a new **RESTRICTIONS BEING LIFTED LADDER** for the new activity and start working through the approach again.

In the event you've struggled with the approach, catching information as you engage with each activity may help you recognise the difficulties you've had and direct you back to the appropriate rule to inform your next step

Otherwise, remember you're not on your own!



# AUTHORS

**Professor Paul Farrand** is Director of the Low-Intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (LICBT) portfolio within Clinical Education, Development and Research (CEDAR); Psychology at the University of Exeter. His main clinical and research interests are in LICBT, especially in a written self-help format and has developed a wide range of written CBT self-help interventions for depression and anxiety. He sits on the Department of Health Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme Expert Advisory Group and national level committees developing a broader psychological therapies workforce and at an international level concerning hospital-based worldwide developments in LICBT. Clinically, he has been Psychological Lead attached to Head and Neck specialties for over 20 years and Academic Lead for the University of Exeter Wellbeing Service.

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Certain specific factors are derived from the exposure therapy model included within 'Reach Out: National Programme Educator Materials to Support the Delivery of Training for Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners Delivering Low Intensity Interventions' by Professor David Richards and Dr Mark Whyte. To ensure suitability for the University of Exeter Student community, Matthew Clayman, Year 2 student studying BA Politics, Philosophy and Economics commented on drafts of this approach and fed into student focused examples.

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