

Example

Approaching Fear Despite Fear Worksheet

Oftentimes, survivors of trauma develop fears that hold them back from living the lives they want, and facing these fears can be extremely difficult. Your therapist may help you manage these fears with behavioral strategies, but cognitive methods such as this one may also be useful. The following examples will help you begin to reappraise feared situations so that you can approach them despite fearing them!

- 1. Write down a few sentences describing something that you fear doing, but that is also very important to you. This should be something that elicits a score between approximately 30-40 on the distress thermometer. For some individuals, this might be attendance at their child's soccer game, practicing assertiveness skills and boundary-setting, or applying for a new job.**

I fear submitting my artwork to an upcoming art show. I enjoy producing the art, but am terrified that people will think I'm a fraud. I'd just forget about it, but it's important to me because my art is meaningful and I think it might be helpful to people who have gone through things similar to those I have experienced. I figure if I can help even one person with my art, I will have succeeded.

- 2. Now, write a few sentences about what you fear about this task, thing, or situation. What does your mind tell you about it that increases your fear? When you think of approaching this situation, what are the thoughts/fears that hold you back?**

I am terrified that people will think I'm a "wannabe" artist and a fraud. I sometimes look at the work and think, "It's not that good; it looks like an amateur did this, who am I fooling?" The closer I get to submitting samples of my work, the louder that voice in my head becomes, and I feel very scared that it will not be accepted and that people will judge me.

- 3. When you imagine these feared outcomes of the feared situation, where do you feel it in your body? What are the sensations that accompany the fear?**

I feel like my stomach flips and my breathing becomes shallow.

- 4. Next, write down at least three reasons that this feared situation/thing is important to you, despite the fear it produces in you.**

First, it is possible that my art could help other people because it could make them feel like they are not alone. Second, it would be good to express myself and it could feel freeing. Finally, it would make me feel like a real artist if I were to appear in an art show. It would symbolize progress.

5. For a moment, imagine that you have done that feared thing and succeeded. When you imagine success, how do you feel emotionally?

I feel great, like I am on top of the world! I feel happy, like I have finally made it as an artist.

6. Keep imagining what it will be like when you face your fear and succeed. What will you gain from this? List at least three ways that accomplishing this will change your life for the better (even if in very small ways).

I will have greater confidence in my abilities. I will also feel like a successful artist, and I will have courage to apply to more art shows in the future.

7. When you imagine the feeling of success, how does it feel in the body? How are the physical sensations of self-confidence and success different from the sensations of fear?

In my body, I feel like my heart is racing a bit, but not in a bad way. I feel both excited and content all at once, and I feel a bit warm inside. I can feel myself smiling. This is different from how fear feels, because with fear I feel like I can't breathe very well and I feel sick to my stomach. I'm also not smiling when I feel afraid.

Strategy 1: Induce positive physical sensations to approach feared situations: Consider for a moment the impact that fear-related physical sensations may have on your thoughts. It is often the case that when our bodies experience fear-related sensations, we produce thoughts that are consistent with that fear, even if those thoughts do not reflect truth or reality. If you can work first with your physical sensations, replacing fear-related sensations with those associated with success and happiness, the resulting thoughts can begin to change as well.

One way to elicit the physical sensations of success, happiness, and empowerment is to imagine what it would feel like to succeed, and what the positive outcomes of this would be, as you did in steps 3 and 4. Whereas sensations related to fear may make you want to withdraw, sensations related to positive feelings often produce a desire to approach. Before approaching a feared situation, it can be helpful to take a few moments to imagine the feelings and outcomes of success, and to intentionally connect with those physical sensations, since those positive sensations will help you approach, rather than avoid, the feared situation.

Strategy 2: Reappraise the worst-case scenario and the consequences of failure: Two things that keep individuals from approaching their fears are: 1) their thoughts about what constitutes failure, and what failure means (including the consequences of failure), and, 2) catastrophic thoughts about the worst-case outcomes of approaching their fears. To approach fear despite fear, one helpful strategy is to begin working on shifting these two types of thoughts. The following points and questions may help you begin to change the way you think about fears and failure:

- Can I redefine failure and success such that even small steps toward the feared situation count as success? Any approach toward fear can be considered practice, or training, and can be considered success.
- Keep in mind that success may be re-defined not as reaching your end goal right away, but rather as “failing great.” Author Kim Liao was rejected 43 times by various literary magazines and publishers one year, but instead of feeling defeated, she set a new goal: Obtain 100 rejections each year (<http://lithub.com/why-you-should-aim-for-100-rejections-a-year/>). According to Liao, a friend of hers, a very successful author, gave her the following advice: “Collect rejections. Set rejection goals. I know someone who shoots for 100 rejections in a year, because if you work that hard to get so many rejections, you’re sure to get a few acceptances, too.” This can be a fantastic way to reframe rejection; Each rejection gets you closer to your ultimate goal, and is considered a “win” of sorts!
- View fear-facing as brain training, since that is what it is! When you feel afraid, the fear center of your brain activates. While this makes you want to avoid and pull away, when you do this, it actually reinforces and strengthens your anxiety.
- If, however, you move toward a feared situation when the fear center of your brain activates, you change the brain for the better! Three things can happen. First, you begin to strengthen areas of your brain associated with emotion regulation. Second, you slowly de-activate the fear center of the brain, which makes the feared situation feel less dangerous. Third, you re-encode the feared situation as less dangerous in the memory center of the brain, making it so that it will be slightly less scary to do that feared thing again in the future.

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- 3. When you imagine these feared outcomes of the feared situation, where do you feel it in your body? What are the sensations that accompany the fear?**
- 4. Next, write down at least three reasons that this feared situation/thing is important to you, despite the fear it produces in you.**
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- 6. Keep imagining what it will be like when you face your fear and succeed. What will you gain from this? List at least three ways that accomplishing this will change your life for the better (even if in very small ways).**

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