




Help students face fears step by step

Complete **gradual exposure tool** that guides counselors and students through using a personalized **fear ladder**, from brainstorming steps to tracking progress.

-  Individual counseling - grade 2-8.
-  Research-based CBT tool
-  Perfect for confronting specific fears.

What's Included

Counselor Guide

Brainstorm Worksheet

Helpful Tools

(Thermometer & Ways to Adjust)

Brave Ladder Worksheet

Practice Log

Editable student worksheets

Brave Ladder

Take your brainstormed steps and arrange them order from easiest to hardest.

My Brave Goal

Petting a large dog at the park.

Step	Rating
Petting a small, calm dog on a leash.	9
Being in the same room as a calm dog.	8
Standing 3 feet from a dog on a leash.	7
Watching a dog play through a window.	6
Watching a dog from across the street.	5
Watching a video of dogs barking.	4
Playing with a realistic stuffed dog.	3
Watching a video about dogs.	2
Looking at photos of puppies.	1

In this resource

Counselor Guide

Walks counselors through introducing gradual exposure, building the brave ladder together, and applying best practices for exposure.

What is the Brave Ladder?

Gradual exposure is a CBT technique that helps students face feared situations step-by-step rather than all at once. It works by teaching the brain that feared situations are safer or more manageable than imagined. Instead of avoidance (which keeps anxiety in place) or flooding (forcing a student into a scary situation all at once), you build a Brave Ladder: a series of small, manageable steps leading to a final goal.

Why It Works

Avoidance makes short-term sense, but keeps fear going long-term. Each time a student successfully faces a step, their brain learns that the situation is less scary than anticipated. This process makes gradual exposure so effective.

Best Practices

- **Normalize Avoidance:** When someone tells us to stay away, that message keeps the fear going.
- **The Goldilocks Zone:** Start at a level that is not too hard and the student may succeed.
- **Stay in the situation:** The student stays in the situation for about half (e.g., from a 6 to a 3) so that the situation is not too dangerous.
- **Repeat before moving up:** Don't move up until the student feels like a 1 or 2. This may take several repetitions.
- **Watch for safety behaviors:** Cover their eyes, prevent the student from leaving, etc.
- **Use rewards:** Especially for your first step, a reward can provide motivation.
- **Revise:** It's okay to adjust the ladder. If a step is too hard, you can always go back to an easier step.

A Note on Scope

The Brave Ladder works well for mild to moderate social fears, performance anxiety, social anxiety, OCD, or trauma history, when used appropriately.

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How The Brave Ladder Works

Step 1: Identify a Single, Clear Target

Don't try to address "anxiety" in general. Pick one specific fear, such as: Separation from a caregiver, speaking in class, fear of dogs, or another specific situation, or test anxiety fears.

Step 2: Brainstorm 8–10 Steps Collaboratively

Building the ladder is a collaborative process. Students who have buy-in are far more likely to participate. Work together to list situations related to the fear. To adjust difficulty, modify these variables:

- **Proximity:** How close is the student to the feared object or situation?
- **Time:** How long must they stay in it?
- **Support:** Is the counselor right there, nearby, or not present?
- **Medium:** Is it a photo, video, or the real thing?

Step 3: Rate Each Step Using the Brave Thermometer (0–10)

Have students rate each brainstormed step:

- **0-2:** No Problem (slight butterflies)
- **3-4:** Easy (a little nervous)
- **5-6:** Medium (challenging but doable)
- **7-8:** Hard (really scary, challenging)
- **9-10:** Very Hard (scariest possible step, feels impossible)

If a student says every step feels equally scary, prompt them to imagine doing it with support rather than alone, for a short time rather than a long time.

Step 4: Fill in the Brave Ladder

Students put the steps to their brave goal in order from easiest to hardest. You do not need to fill all 10 rings, use as many steps as you need.

Step 5: Practice & Track

Use the Practice log to track when the student tries each step and how it went. Generally, you are looking for students to decrease their rating of a step and to practice it at least 3 times.

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In this resource

Brave Ladder Tools

Brave Thermometer

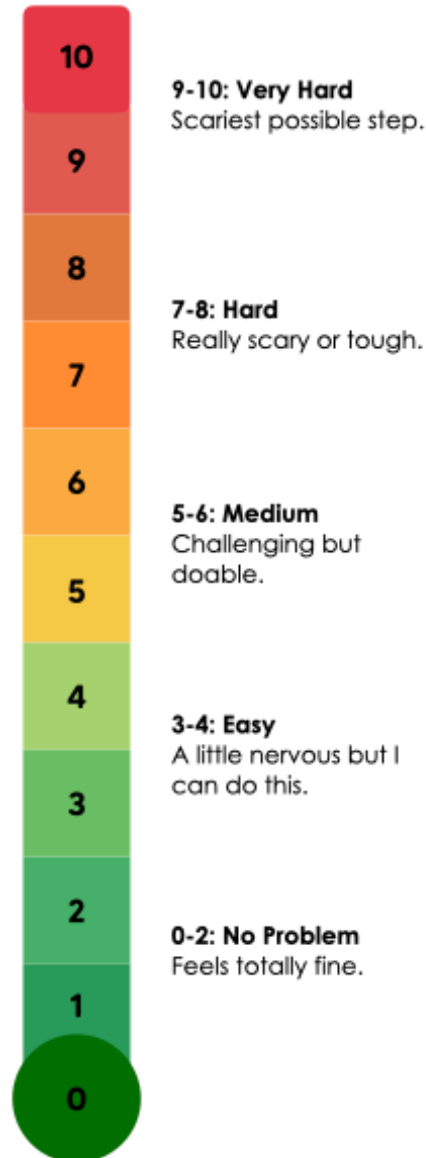
Ways to adjust difficulty

Helps students rank the steps toward their brave goal.

Brave Ladder Tools

Use these to brainstorm and rate your steps.

Brave Thermometer



Ways to Adjust Steps

Use these options to make steps harder or easier.



Proximity

How close are you to the scary thing? Far away is easier, up close is harder.



Time

How long can you do it for? A minute is easier than ten minutes.



Support

Is someone next to you, nearby, or not there at all?



Real or Practice

Is it a picture, a video, a toy version, or the real thing?

What you'll love



Straightforward and step-by-step

Easy to use for any specific fear

Editable student worksheets

Low prep, print and go

Research-driven CBT tool

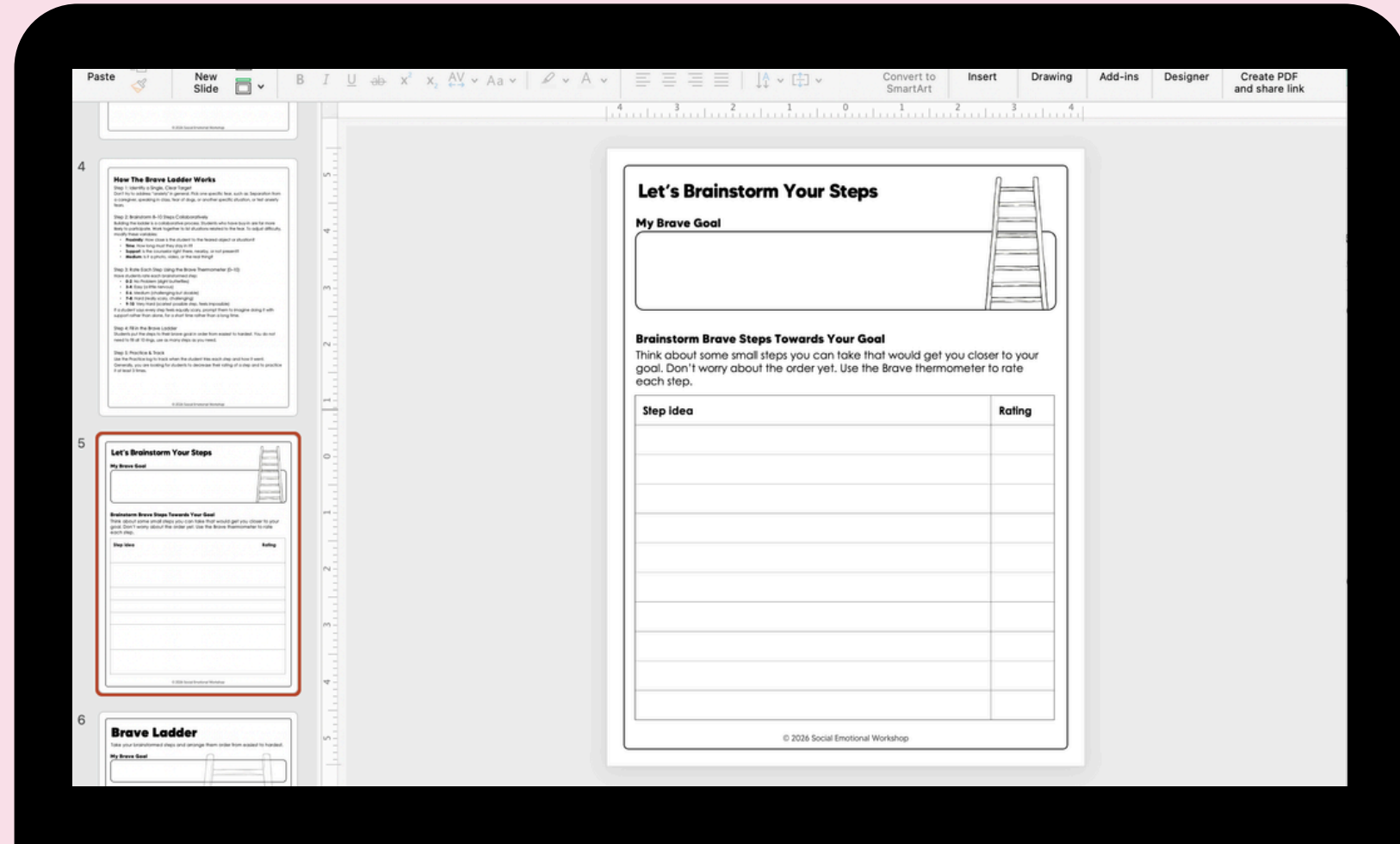


Color & BW

Easy printing with color and black line options

PowerPoint

editable student worksheets



Practical Details



Grade Level

2nd and up



Made For

Individual counseling



File Format

PDF + PowerPoint



AND

ready to print and use



Printing

Color + BW

More CBT Activities



CBT WORKSHEETS



school counseling tools

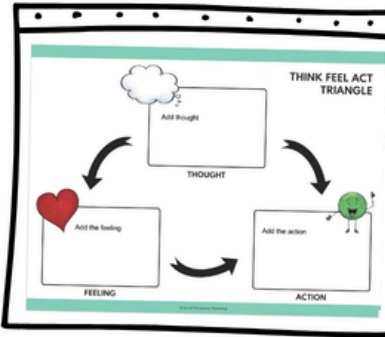
COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS



THOUGHTS FEELINGS ACTIONS

2-5

CBT COUNSELING ACTIVITIES



THINK FEEL ACT TRIANGLE

THOUGHT

FEELING

ACTION

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NEGATIVE THINKING

counseling activities

Thought Traps

Marcus got called down to the principal's office.

"I must be in huge trouble. They're probably going to suspend me and call my parents, and everyone will know."

20

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3-5

THOUGHT DETECTIVE

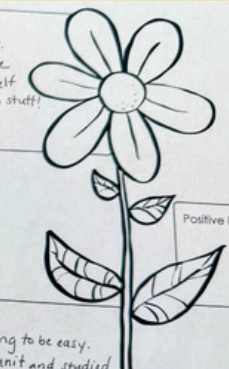
3-5

negative thinking game



Thought Detective Agency

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Positive Action

Try my best.
Take my time.
Remind myself
I know this stuff!

Positive Thought

This is going to be easy.
I liked this unit and studied

Hi! I'm Laura

I create research-driven, uncomplicated tools and resources designed to build students' social and emotional skills in counseling or the classroom.

During ten years as a school psychologist, I wore all the hats - but the one I never took off was supporting my colleagues.

Whether you're a first-year counselor or a seasoned teacher, I want you to have the tools you need to support each student.

Visit [my blog](#) for more ideas and [subscribe](#) for exclusive resources!

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