

Hierarchy of Fears for OCD

When dealing with OCD, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by obsessions and the compulsions that follow. One way to begin managing this is by creating a hierarchy of fears. Think of it as a roadmap that helps you identify and rank your fears—from those that cause a little anxiety to those that feel really intense. This worksheet will guide you through the process of gradually working through each fear, starting with the least challenging. **By taking small steps, you can begin to weaken the grip of obsessions and compulsions and feel more in control over time.**

STEP 1: What is your primary fear?

Example: Fear of becoming contaminated.

STEP 2: List smaller fears that are related to your primary fear.

1. *Touching a doorknob.*

2. *Using a public restroom.*

3. *Shaking hands with someone.*

4. *Eating without washing hands.*

5. *Sitting on a public bench.*

STEP 3: Rank these fears from 1 (low anxiety) to 10 (high anxiety).

Situation That Triggers Your Fear	Anxiety Level
1. <i>Touching a doorknob.</i>	4
2. <i>Using a public restroom.</i>	9
3. <i>Shaking hands with someone.</i>	6
4. <i>Eating without washing hands.</i>	10
5. <i>Sitting on a public bench.</i>	5

Anxiety Scale

10 panic

9 

8 fearful

7 

6 afraid

5 

4 worried

3 

2 okay

1 

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*



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STEP 4: Prepare for challenges

What makes this technique effective is **staying in the situation until your anxiety naturally comes down on its own**. This process is what helps your nervous system to learn that the feared situation is tolerable (and teaches your mind that situations are not as scary as you may think!).

As you can imagine, facing your fears and waiting for your anxiety to come down is difficult! So here are two ways to prepare for the challenge.

List effective coping skills in case they're needed

If a situation is far more challenging than you thought, you may need to use coping skills like taking a break, deep breathing, listening to music, or taking a walk. List coping skills that you know work for you on the right.

counting backwards, listening to music,
progressive muscle relaxation,
visualization, positive self-talk

Plan some appropriate rewards

Facing fears takes practice and motivation! Use the space to the right to consider small rewards you are willing to reward yourself with, like snacks, treats, money towards a purchase, etc.

snacks, chocolates, money towards a new purchase

STEP 5: Plan your challenges and rewards, starting with the least anxiety-provoking

Challenges That Trigger Your Fear	Anxiety Level	Reward Per Try
<i>Touching a doorknob</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>snacks</i>
<i>Sitting on a public bench</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>chocolates</i>
<i>Shaking hands with someone</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>chocolates</i>
<i>Using a public restroom</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>\$ to a purchase</i>
<i>Eating without washing hands</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>\$ to a purchase</i>





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STEP 6: Do challenges and record your progress

At the beginning of each challenge, use the Anxiety Scale to rate your anxiety. Your goal is to **stay in the scary situation until your anxiety naturally comes down on its own**. Every so often through the challenge, re-rate your anxiety. You can stop the challenge when your anxiety has come down significantly (at least halfway). Unless a challenge is much too difficult or you get really stuck, try not to use coping skills. When the same challenge causes less *starting* anxiety, you'll know you're ready to move on to the next challenge.

Date	Challenges That Trigger Your Fear	Anxiety At:		Anxiety Scale
		Start	End	
May 3	Touching a doorknob	4	2	10 panic
May 4	Touching a doorknob	2	1	9 
May 5	Sitting on a public bench	5	2	8 fearful
May 6	Sitting on a public bench	3	2	7 
May 7	Shaking hands with someone	7	3	6 afraid
May 8	Shaking hands with someone	6	3	5 
May 9	Shaking hands with someone	3	1	4 worried
May 10	Shaking hands with someone	2	1	3 
May 11	Using a public restroom	9	6	2 okay
May 12	Using a public restroom	7	3	1 
May 13	Using a public restroom	7	3	

As you work through the challenges, use these spaces to reflect and adjust if needed.

How does it feel to “wait out” anxiety?	Do any of the challenges need to be adjusted?	Are rewards and coping skills (if necessary) working?
<p>It was really hard at first and didn't feel natural. After a couple of challenges, I think I got the hang of it though.</p>	<p>May 11: Using a public restroom at the mall was way too overwhelming</p> <p>May 12: Using a public restroom at work went better</p>	<p>May 11: needed to use coping skills at the mall. Music didn't help but counting backwards did.</p>

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Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



325+
Companies Reviewed



3,625+
Hours of Firsthand Experience



1,545+
Data Points Analyzed



[Best Online Therapy for OCD](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

[Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



[Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

[Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.

