

'Feel the fear and do it anyway'**– Susan Jefferies –**

Avoiding anything that makes us anxious is in some ways a natural reaction. However, avoiding some situations that create anxiety can lead to the development of phobias and loss of confidence. Once we begin to avoid things, we may find our mobility becomes increasingly restricted.

When you either stay in the situation you fear, or deliberately put yourself in that position, your anxiety will go up, reach a plateau and then go down again. The first time you do this the anxiety will take time to subside. The second time you face the situation you fear, your anxiety will be less severe and fall in a shorter time. Each time you put yourself into that situation your anxiety will progressively be less severe and die away more quickly. The diagram below shows how this anxiety hill gets smaller and smaller.

The best way of overcoming avoidance and loss of confidence is by tackling your fears one step at a time in easy stages. This technique is called graded practice or systematic desensitisation. By identifying situations which you avoid, and gradually confronting them time and again, you can reduce the anxiety associated with those situations. It is important to practice easier tasks first, so as to build up your confidence before tackling more difficult situations.

When you confront the anxiety-provoking situation be prepared. Be armed with a relaxation technique, understand about breathing control, and have a number of positive self statements you can repeat to yourself. Expect some anxiety – do not expect to feel no anxiety; but you can be sure that if you carry on confronting your anxiety it *will* go down.

