

IMAGINAL EXPOSURE FOR OCD

Imaginal exposure is a form of ERP in which you deliberately imagine a feared outcome in enough detail to bring up the distress connected to it while resisting compulsions.

What is imaginal exposure? You intentionally picture or describe the feared scenario as though it happened, or could happen, instead of avoiding it or reassuring yourself. This may involve a written script, recording, or repeated imagery.

When Is It Used?

It is useful when the feared outcome cannot be safely or practically recreated in real life, or when the obsession centers on a past event, future catastrophe, moral fear, intrusive image, or uncertainty. Examples include harming someone, causing an accident, being responsible for a tragedy, going to hell, or discovering that you did something terrible.

How Does It Work?

- 1. Identify the feared outcome.** Name what OCD fears actually happened or could happen.
- 2. Imagine it in detail.** Include what happens, what you notice, others' reactions, and the consequences you fear.
- 3. Allow the distress.** Let the anxiety, guilt, images, and uncertainty be present without escaping the scene.
- 4. Prevent compulsions.** Do not reassure, check, review, neutralize, or analyze whether the story is realistic.
- 5. Repeat.** Practice experiencing the feared story and uncertainty without treating them like an emergency.

Example

Core fear: "What if I hit someone with my car and did not realize it?"

Example imaginal exposure: "I am driving home and feel a bump in the road. I keep driving. A few minutes later I wonder if the bump was a person. I picture someone lying injured behind me while I continue down the road. Police later trace the accident back to me. I am told that I seriously hurt someone because I did not stop. Their family is devastated and angry with me. I feel horrified and guilty. I may never know with complete certainty what that bump was or whether I caused harm. During this exposure I let myself imagine the feared story without checking the road, reviewing the drive, asking for reassurance, or trying to prove that it did not happen."

Important: OCD can make thoughts and images feel dangerous, as if imagining something could make it happen or mean something about you. Imaginal exposure helps retrain the brain by intentionally having the feared thought without doing compulsions. **With repetition, the brain can learn to no longer sound the alarm in response to a thought.**