

Imaginal Exposures

Some OCD fears cannot be safely or realistically practiced in real life. Imaginal exposure allows you to face the feared possibility through a written or recorded scenario while practicing response prevention.

When might imaginal exposure be used?

Examples of feared scenarios

- Going to hell
- Unwanted sexual intrusions or feared sexual scenarios
- Fearing that you ran someone over with a car
- Other feared outcomes that cannot be directly tested in real life

Why use imagination?

Imagining a feared situation can activate many of the same emotional and threat-learning systems that become active when something feels real. This gives you an opportunity to practice experiencing the thought, image, fear, and uncertainty without escaping, neutralizing, checking, or seeking reassurance.

The goal is not simply to make anxiety disappear. With repetition, distress may decrease, but imaginal exposure also helps build new learning. You can learn that having a thought does not make it an action, a prediction, or a guarantee that something will happen. You can also practice accepting that complete certainty is not possible.

How is imaginal exposure done?

1. Create the scenario

You and your therapist develop a script that describes the feared situation or worst-case possibility relevant to your OCD.

2. Make it specific

The script includes enough detail to bring up the fear rather than reassuring you or explaining why the fear is unlikely.

3. Read or listen

You may read the script repeatedly or make an audio recording and listen to it as part of exposure practice.

4. Allow the response

Notice the thoughts, images, emotions, body sensations, and uncertainty that show up. SUDS ratings may be used to track distress.

5. Practice response prevention

Resist compulsions such as analyzing, checking your reaction, mentally undoing the script, seeking reassurance, or trying to prove the feared outcome cannot happen.

Watch for OCD trying to turn the exposure into a threat

OCD may tell you that writing, saying, or imagining the feared event will make it more likely to happen. This can reflect thought-action fusion or other beliefs that give thoughts more power or meaning than they actually have. The practice is to allow those doubts to be present without performing a compulsion to make sure you are safe.

Imaginal exposure teaches: I can think about a feared possibility without treating the thought as something I must prevent, solve, neutralize, or prove false.