



ERP: EXPOSURE

What does Exposure in ERP mean?

Exposure means purposefully approaching the experiences that OCD tells you to avoid or that you feel you can't handle. Avoidance might feel safer in the moment, but it ultimately allows anxiety and OCD to grow stronger.

When we choose to approach the experiences we've been avoiding, we gradually and safely build our capacity to cope with discomfort. Over time, this helps reduce OCD's influence and allows us to focus on living a meaningful life with fewer rules and restrictions.

How?! This can be done in a safe and graded way. The goal is to create some discomfort and build your capacity to cope, not to overwhelm or traumatise yourself. Start with smaller challenges, and as you gain confidence and experience, you can gradually work your way up to bigger ones.

It's not about forcing yourself to like the trigger or trying to make the anxiety disappear. It's about teaching your brain that you can handle the discomfort without doing compulsions.

Instead of...

- Avoiding: I won't drink at my friends so that I don't have to use their bathroom.
- Avoiding: I can't watch that movie because it will trigger an obsession.
- Avoiding: I'll ask my partner to check the door again.
- Avoiding: This room display is "not right". I need to get out of here.
- Avoiding: I must not think bad thoughts.

We could start exposure by ...

- Having small sips of water. Walk past your friend's bathroom door multiple times. Work up to touching the door.
- Watching a trailer of the movie with the sound on mute. See if you can work your way up to watching with low volume.
- Asking partner to check only once. Ask only one question about their checking.
- Sitting in the "not right" room for 10 seconds. Leave, and return to try again. See if you can increase the time spent in the room each time.
- Writing the word "bad" on a piece of paper. Turn the paper face down & put it in another room. See how long you can be in the same room as the paper. Gradually increase the time.

What about Response Prevention?

Exposure is only one part of ERP. It isn't effective if we are still doing compulsions, so this is where the Response Prevention (RP) becomes essential. There are many ways to do successful ERP, and each of these will be outlined in the following information sheets: Resist, Delay, Reduce, and Refocus.

