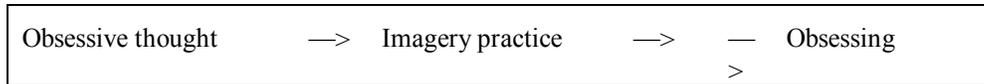


PRACTICING WITH IMAGERY

I repeat my fears until I'm bored to tears.

Even when you learn that your repetitive worries and habits are illogical, you may continue to obsess because your mind has been trained to react to certain trigger events. The way to “untrain” your mind is to intentionally expose yourself to the trigger event without trying to resist anxiety with rituals. Tension eventually lessens and the association of the trigger with obsessing is broken. Often, it is best to start exposure through imagery.¹



Instead of waiting for distressing thoughts to pop into your mind, intentionally think them. This works for two reasons: (1) obsessions are reactions to a trigger; when you choose to have them, you increase your control over them; (2) avoiding things that distress you increases anxiety; if you feared the color purple and imagined sitting in a purple room, you would feel tremendous tension initially, but eventually it would pass. There are two ways to practice obsessing:

1. Pick a specific time each day to spend obsessing. Give yourself a full 10 minutes to think of or write down all your worries. When unwanted obsessions come at other times, tell them they will have your full attention during your practice period. If you tend to obsess while trying to fall asleep, you are using bedtime for practice. This is poor timing. Worry earlier in the evening. Just as you become less aware of a bad odor the longer you are exposed to it, by bedtime, “interest” in your worry will diminish. Fighting obsessions intensifies them. Allowing time to obsess, de-energizes them.
2. Create scenarios that exaggerate your obsessions. Write a story and/or record one. Listen to or read your story over and over for an entire practice period of 45–90 minutes. Focus your attention on physical sensations of anxiety to release tension. Continue imagining the scenario until your fear reduces. Rate your distress on a 0–10 scale (0 = no distress, 10 = intense distress) each time you say, write, or listen to your story. Daily practice sessions for three weeks can dramatically alter brain chemistry. When spontaneous obsessions and rituals decline or stop, you can have practice periods as needed. Instead of being upset if a worry comes back, you can simply tell yourself, “My brain must be ‘heating up’ because I’m under stress. It looks like I need a practice session.” The following are examples of possible imagery scenarios:
 - Doorknob germs crawling all over your body and causing a gruesome disease.
 - People coming into your house when it is not perfectly clean and scolding you.
 - A crowd of people making fun of you because a few hairs are out of place.
 - Your friends talking about you because you made a mistake on your checkbook.
 - Having an empty closet 10 years from now because you threw out an outfit.

If the thought of imagining your scenario terrifies you, work with a partner. Hearing your worries from someone else’s mouth or developing them to their “illogical” extension makes them seem absurd and can give immediate relief.

¹ Method for imagery practice is adapted from *Stop Obsessing!* By Edna Foa and Reid Wilson (Bantam Books, 1991).