

Accepting Your Upsetting Thoughts

Many people have disturbing and even horrifying thoughts. These thoughts are not based in reality, yet many people act as if they are real. Some people obsess about germs and worry that the things around them are somehow contaminated and dangerous. Others can't stop thinking about the possibility of losing control and even harming someone. Many people worry about making irreparable mistakes.

These obsessive thoughts can be very disturbing. Some people find they can't stop thinking about these thoughts without doing very specific "neutralizing" behaviors like counting, arranging things in order, washing or cleaning. These behaviors, however, only offer temporary relief. In the long run, neutralizing behaviors just make your obsessive thinking worse by giving them power which is not real.

Psychologists believe that the best way to rid yourself of obsessive disturbing thoughts is not to fight them, but rather to accept them and even force yourself to think about them. Psychologists call this exposure therapy. Exposure therapy is a process where you slowly expose yourself to your upsetting thoughts or situations that trigger your anxiety forcing you to tolerate the feelings you once had to avoid. Eventually, you learn to desensitize yourself to these disturbing thoughts and they no longer have power over your thoughts and behavior.

To begin this process, you will fill in two worksheets.

Acknowledging Your Upsetting Thoughts

Writing down your obsessive thoughts is the first step to getting control over them. This worksheet asks you to write down all the thoughts that upset you, with the understanding that some of these thoughts might be embarrassing to put on paper. Writing down and acknowledging these thoughts is the first step to taking their power away. After you write down all the thoughts that upset you, rate each thought on a scale of 1 to 100, with 1="These thoughts don't bother me at all," and 100="These thoughts are completely intolerable."

Let Your Upsetting Thoughts Float Away

On the second worksheet, write down your *least* upsetting thought (the one with the lowest score from the previous page). Write down the same thought 10 times in the clouds. Write down this thought slowly and deliberately thinking about the thought and what it means to you. Then stare at this page for about a minute. Now shut your eyes and for five minutes imagine your disturbing thoughts floating by on the clouds. Observe them going by in your mind, and don't react to them. Breathe deeply, relax your muscles and seek a sense of calm.

Do this exercise with this one thought for three or four days or until you feel that this upsetting thought hardly has any effect on you at all (in other words, you would rate it below 10). Now repeat the exercise with another thought that has a lower initial rating. Continue to practice letting your thoughts float away until you feel confident you can tolerate your upsetting thoughts without having to perform behaviors to neutralize them.

Letting Go Of Your Upsetting Thoughts

Write down a single upsetting thought in each cloud. Then close your eyes for five minutes and imagine your thoughts floating away.

