

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP)

What is the Exposure and Response Prevention Technique?

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is the gold-standard cognitive behavioral treatment for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), panic, and severe anxiety. It consists of two distinct parts: Exposure, which involves purposefully confronting the thoughts, images, situations, or physical sensations that trigger your anxiety, and Response Prevention, which means choosing to refrain from doing the compulsions, rituals, avoidance, or safety behaviors you normally use to make the anxiety go away.

Historically, people believed exposure worked simply through habituation (waiting in a scary situation until your anxiety drops to zero). However, leading clinical research from experts like Dr. Michelle Craske and Dr. Jonathan Abramowitz shows that the true engine of ERP is Inhibitory Learning. When you face a fear without using safety behaviors, you do not erase the old fear pathway in your brain; instead, you build a brand-new "safety pathway" that competes with and inhibits (blocks out) the old danger signal. Because of this, your anxiety does not actually need to go down during an exposure for the treatment to work. The real goal is learning that your feared outcome does not happen and that you can tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty and distress.

Case Example: "If I don't wash, I will get terribly sick"

Maya, a graphic designer, struggled with severe contamination OCD. Whenever she touched a public surface like a doorknob or a grocery cart, she was flooded with anxiety and the thought, "If I don't wash my hands immediately, I will get terribly sick and ruin my health." To cope, she carried hand sanitizer everywhere and washed her hands until they were raw.

Therapist: Today we are going to practice ERP by touching the bottom of your shoe and then eating a snack without washing your hands or using sanitizer. What does your anxiety predict will happen?

Maya: My brain says I am 90% sure I will get violently ill by tomorrow, and that the anxiety of not washing will be completely unbearable.

Therapist: That is a very clear prediction. In ERP, we want to test that prediction out. Remember, our goal today is not to make your anxiety drop to zero. Even if your distress stays at an 80 or 90 the entire time, we are building new inhibitory learning. By eating the snack without doing your washing ritual, we are teaching your brain a new truth that will compete with the OCD fear. Ready to lean into the discomfort?

Maya: My heart is racing, but yes. I am touching the shoe, and now I am holding the apple. Every part of me wants to run to the sink.

Therapist: You are doing great. Instead of fighting the anxiety, just notice it and talk it out. What are you feeling right now?

Maya: I am feeling really anxious and disgusted, and my hands feel tingling and dirty.

Therapist: Stay right there with those feelings, without using any safety behaviors. Let us see what happens over the next 24 hours.

After this back-and-forth exchange and completing the exercise, Maya's anxiety remained high for the rest of the afternoon, hovering around a 75. However, the next day she woke up completely healthy. By violating her expectations, Maya experienced a powerful shift. She realized that even though the anxiety stayed high during the exposure, her feared outcome did not come true and she was capable of surviving intense uncertainty without her rituals. Over weeks of practicing in different settings, the new safety association grew stronger, stripping the OCD thoughts of their urgency and control over her life.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Select an exposure task from your Fear Hierarchy or identify a specific trigger you want to confront. Write down the exposure activity:

Step 2. Test your predictions (Expectancy Violation). Before starting, clearly identify what you are afraid will happen if you confront this situation without using safety behaviors. What is the worst-case scenario your brain is predicting, and how likely (0% to 100%) does it feel right now?

Step 3. Identify the Response Prevention. List every compulsion, ritual, distraction, reassurance-seeking behavior, or "just in case" safety item (like hand sanitizer or a safe person) that you must completely eliminate before, during, and after the exercise:

Step 4. Lean into the exposure and "Talk It Out" (Affect Labeling). Engage in the trigger and stay in the situation. Instead of trying to calm down or distract yourself, mindfully state your feelings and body sensations out loud as they arise (e.g., "I am noticing my heart racing and I feel really anxious right now").

Step 5. Consolidate your new learning. After the exposure is over, reflect on what the experience taught you. Did the feared outcome actually occur? Were you able to tolerate the distress and uncertainty without your safety behaviors? Write down what you learned:

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **Focus on Learning, Not Fear Reduction:** Feeling anxious during an exposure is a sign you are doing it right. Thanks to inhibitory learning, your distress rating (SUDs) does not need to drop during the exercise for you to succeed. Focus on tolerating the feeling and proving your predictions wrong.
- **Throw Out All Safety Signals:** Even tiny or brief safety behaviors (like mentally reviewing, asking a loved one "Are you sure I'm okay?", or carrying medication "just in case") block the brain from learning that you are safe on your own. Complete the exposure without any crutches.
- **Surprise Yourself and Vary It Up:** The more you surprise your brain by doing things that feel "unsafe" (expectancy violation), the stronger the new memory becomes. Jump around your hierarchy, combine different triggers together, and practice in many different locations and contexts to lock in your progress.
- **Practice Every Day:** Think of anxious feelings as the raw materials of change. The more frequently and boldly you lean into your triggers without doing rituals, the faster you will carve out a deep, lasting pathway of safety in your brain.

Final Note

Exposure and Response Prevention teaches us a revolutionary truth: courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to move forward while fear is sitting right next to you. When you stop performing rituals to neutralize your anxiety, you shatter the illusion that your thoughts and feelings are dangerous. By leaning into uncertainty and letting yourself be surprised by your

own resilience, you build a powerful new relationship with your mind and reclaim the freedom to live life on your terms.