

## Module 6: Overestimation of threat

People with OCD often overestimate the likelihood of threats or bad events. Reasons can be:

- ▶ Inaccurate information
  - Example: Some parents overestimate the likelihood of threats in order to teach their children to be careful (e.g., risk of fire if lights are not turned off)
    - This may promote increased anxiety in children!
- ▶ Unrealistic pessimism
  - People with OCD estimate their personal risk to be greater in many areas (e.g., general risk of illness) in comparison to others
- ▶ Negative view of future
  - One negative event is used to infer future events: *"When it rains, it pours. What happened once will happen again and again."*
  - Thus, wrong or exaggerated conclusions are drawn
  - This can promote avoidance behavior
- ▶ Catastrophizing
  - People with OCD usually amplify the negative consequences of events much more than people without OCD
  - They do not "think through" the concerns: They always fear the worst and perform compulsions whenever fear or anxiety occurs

### What can you do?

- ▶ Try to think your fears through to their logical or realistic end
- ▶ Think through the consequences of your biggest concern (e.g., Making a mistake at work). Many fears, when viewed in the light of day, do not appear to be as devastating as when they first occur

### Aim: Inform yourself!

- ▶ If possible, always consider all aspects of your fears, do not focus only on the negative consequences, instead take into account other less catastrophic or even neutral possibilities
  - Gather the relevant information. Check reliable sources to find out what factors weigh against your fears
  - Inform yourself not only about the worst case, but also about less catastrophic, neutral, or even positive outcomes of a situation
  - Consider alternative explanations
  - When you find a probability for an event, also consider the counter probability

**Exercise 1:** Fill in the table with your own examples.

Obsession	Estimated probability?	New information, search result	Alternative thoughts and counter probability
<i>Becoming infected with HIV</i>	<i>Many people have died from HIV/AIDS, so it must be very likely to contract it and then die as well  Maybe 30 %</i>	<i>The vast majority of people do not contract HIV  Lifetime prevalence &lt; 1%</i>	<i>The probability of not contracting the disease is above 99%  HIV/AIDS mortality rates are declining every year  There is no indication that I might be ill</i>

### How likely is the feared event?

- ▶ Many people with checking compulsions overestimate this probability
- ▶ The actual probability can be approximated statistically. By connecting the individual probabilities of the necessary preconditions for this event
- ▶ This is done mathematically by multiplication

**Example: Burglary in your own apartment**

- The probability that an attempt is ever made to break into an apartment is statistically (set high) around 10%.
- The probability that the door is open and no one is at home may be higher: maybe 20%.
- The probability that a burglar will visit your neighborhood just tomorrow is also perhaps 20%, if taken to a high level.
- That of all places your house/apartment is targeted is perhaps 40% likely at high estimate.

To calculate the probability that a burglar will break into your apartment tomorrow, you must now multiply these individual probabilities and therefore this event is **0.16%** likely!

$$(0.1[10\%] \times 0.2 [20\%] \times 0.2 [20\%] \times 0.4 [40\%]) = 0.0016$$

**Exercise 2:**

Calculate probability

Identify factors that must come together for a feared event to occur. Each influencing factor has a certain probability from 0.01 (= 1%) via 0.5 (= 50%) up to 1 (= 100%) and is to be multiplied with other factors. Each additional factor/condition reduces the probability of occurrence considerably.

Negative event	Each probability
Factor 1:	_____ % = _____
Factor 2:	_____ % = _____
Factor 3:	_____ % = _____
Factor 4:	_____ % = _____

Factor 5:	_____ % = _____
The product results from the multiplication (x) of the numbers above: 0,____x 0,____x 0,____x 0,____x 0,____=0,____ (for example, 0.5 means 50%) This is equivalent to _____%.	

### Recognize and account for overestimation

- ▶ Ask people you know and compare it with your own estimation
- ▶ Always keep in mind that you may tend to overestimate the likelihood of a negative event
- ▶ Consider that many individual factors must coincide at the same time for your worst fear to come true
- ▶ Usually this is very, very unlikely

### Supplement: Ruminating

Many people with depression, and also with OCD, complain of endless ruminating, brooding and worrying. Features of rumination are the following:

- ▶ Content:
  - Ruminating over "Why?" (e.g.: The reason for a sickness)
  - Ruminating over past events
  - Ruminating over the fact that you are ruminating
- ▶ Type and Manner:
  - While ruminating it's hard to find an end and we often go around in circles (propagating "endless loops")
  - there is a risk of losing awareness of the fact that you are ruminating
  - there is usually no "solution" (the difference from problem solving)
  - actions rarely follow (the difference from planning)
  - thinking is often abstract, general and unspecific

Ruminating is not the same as contemplating or planning!

**Exercise 3:**

Think of a strategy you want to use when you ruminate, such as a physical exercise.

What strategy helps you stop you from ruminating?

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**Notes**

Space for unanswered questions or problems that have come up or experiences that you would like to talk about in the next session:

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Other notes:

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