

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>	<p><i>Many people have died from HIV/AIDS, so it must be very likely to contract it and then die as well</i></p> <p><i>Maybe 30 %</i></p>	<p><i>The vast majority of people do not contract HIV</i></p> <p><i>Lifetime prevalence < 1%</i></p>	<p><i>The probability of not contracting the disease is above 99%</i></p> <p><i>HIV/AIDS mortality rates are declining every year</i></p> <p><i>There is no indication that I might be ill</i></p>

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?

Notes

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

Other notes:
