

Exposure & Response Prevention: An Example of How This “Brake Job” Works (Modified from Aureen Pinto Wagner 2003)

Liam (age 9): Perfectionism

OCD puts repeated thoughts (“obsessions”) in Liam’s head about things needing to be perfect or “just right”. To relieve his anxiety, Liam engages in rigid and ritualistic behaviour (“compulsions”) so that he doesn’t make mistakes and so that things turn out perfectly. The goal of treatment is to boss back OCD and break OCD’s rules. This involves helping Liam to allow things to stay “just wrong” instead of “just right” (EXPOSURE). Liam has to learn to tell OCD to take a hike, to make mistakes, and to “stick it out” until his anxious feelings pass (RESPONSE PREVENTION). Each time Liam rides up and down the “worry hill” by exposing himself to his perfectionistic obsessions, but not giving in to the perfectionistic compulsions, his fear shrinks smaller and smaller. By doing ERP assignments Liam discovers that making mistakes doesn’t cause the catastrophes his OCD says it will; in fact nothing really terrible happens at all (despite what OCD says!)

LIAM’S SYMPTOMS

- Gives up on things if he can’t do them perfectly right away (e.g. video games, skateboarding, bike riding).
- Meal Ritual: won’t eat lunch if he hasn’t had breakfast; won’t eat dinner if he hasn’t had lunch.
- Won’t use his coloured pencils because they’ll change length (they MUST stay the same length!); and doesn’t want his markers to ever be out of order.
- Liam’s writing at school must be perfect or he has a meltdown.
- Liam’s spelling at school must be perfect.
- Can’t decide what to eat in restaurants in case he chooses the wrong thing.
- Paper airplanes must be folded “just so”.

LIAM’S FEAR HIERARCHY

Goal: Make mistakes and learn that not being perfect is perfectly fine. Starting with the lowest number (i.e. the “easiest” ones to boss back), do each of the following (at Liam’s speed, and when he’s ready to tackle each one).

<i>Exposure Assignment</i>	<i>Fear Temperature</i>
1. Sharpen pencils into uneven lengths	2
2. Fold paper planes incorrectly	3
3. Spell two words incorrectly on purpose	5
4. Drop water on homework assignment to leave smudge	6
5. Choose first item on menu for dinner at restaurant	8

- | | |
|--|----|
| 6. Rip pages out of magazine and throw in garbage | 8 |
| 7. Scribble over homework and hand it in without erasing | 9 |
| 8. Not doing a skateboard trick 'right' | 9 |
| 9. Sit at piano and play notes backwards | 10 |
| 10. Have mum not give me a turn at the computer | 10 |

Break down exposure assignments high on Liam's list into smaller steps (if he needs to), and then assign each a number on the Fearmometer. This way he can work his way up from tiny steps to bigger ones.

For example, let's take "**Not doing a skateboard trick 'right' (9)**". This is what it might look like if we broke it down:

Steps (each step becomes its own Lasting Change Activity)	Fear Temperature
1. Purposefully do the trick 'wrong' in the garage where no one can see me	2
2. Purposely do the trick 'wrong' one time in the driveway	4
3. Purposely do the trick 'wrong' once when I'm with friends	6
4. Purposely do the trick 'wrong' three times with friends	8
5. Purposely do the trick 'wrong' at school during lunch break so kids and teachers can see me	9
6. Purposely do the trick really badly so I make a public display in front of neighbours and friends	10