

Obsessive Thoughts: Triggers and Rituals

Disturbing obsessive thoughts are usually triggered by something that occurs in your external world, even though you might not be aware of it. It could be a picture, something you hear on TV, a particular situation, or it could be something as basic as the time of day. For example:

- Terrence worried that he would catch a deadly disease whenever he used a public bathroom.
- Every time Beth's car hit an unexpected bump in the road, she worried that she ran over a person or an animal.
- Juan felt that his father would die of a heart attack every time he went on a business trip.
- Margaret could not stop thinking about the sins she believed she had committed every time she passed a church.

To deal with their obsessive thinking, many people develop rituals which *seem* to help calm them down and temporarily feel in control of their thoughts. However, in reality, these rituals reinforce their obsessive thinking much the way people develop other unconscious habits.

Psychologists find that the best way to help people rid themselves of their obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals is to systematically confront their disturbing thoughts, starting with the least upsetting thought and moving one-by-one to the most upsetting thought. People are taught to accept and tolerate their thoughts rather than using magical rituals to cope with them. This highly effective technique is referred to as Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP).

Before beginning ERP, it will be helpful for you to understand the triggers for your obsessive thoughts as well as the rituals you use to cope with them. This worksheet is designed to help you identify your triggers and rituals and communicate them to a therapist or others who are helping you conquer your obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviors. It is understandable if you this worksheet causes you some anxiety, but try and fill it in quickly and honestly.

