Imaginal Exposure

What is the Imaginal Exposure Technique?

When we are haunted by terrifying "what if" thoughts, intrusive mental images, or painful past memories, our natural instinct is to push them out of our minds. However, trying to suppress or neutralize a thought only convinces your brain that the thought is dangerous, making it come back stronger. Imaginal Exposure is a targeted, narrative-based exercise where you intentionally confront feared thoughts, memories, or worst-case scenarios by writing them down in a vivid, present-tense story (often called a "worry script") or recording yourself speaking them aloud, and then repeatedly reading or listening to that script.

Imaginal exposure is especially useful when a fear is impossible, unethical, or impractical to test in the real world (such as a fear of accidentally harming someone, a fear of a loved one dying, or a past traumatic memory). Through a process called **Inhibitory Learning**, repeatedly facing the story without performing mental rituals or seeking reassurance teaches your brain a critical lesson: *a thought is just a thought, and a memory is just a memory*. Even if your distress stays high during the exercise, you build a new mental pathway of safety that overrides the panic, proving to yourself that you can handle the darkest scenarios your mind can invent without falling apart.

Case Example: "I might have hit someone with my car"

David, an accountant, struggled with Hit-and-Run OCD. Whenever he drove over a small bump or pothole in the road, he was flooded with panic and the intrusive image of a pedestrian lying injured behind him, sparking the thought, "What if I just hit someone and didn't notice?" To relieve the terror, he would circle the block multiple times to check the street and inspect his bumper for dents.

Therapist: Because we cannot ethically go out and hit someone with a car to practice exposure, we are going to use Imaginal Exposure. We will write a short, vivid story in the first person, present tense, where your absolute worst fear comes true or remains completely uncertain, and we won't include any reassurance at the end. What is the ultimate worst-case consequence your brain is afraid of?
David: That I accidentally hit someone, don't check, and the police come to my house and arrest me for a hit-and-run, ruining my life and making me a monster.
Therapist: Let us write a script describing that exact scenario happening right now, including what you see, hear, and feel in your body. When you read it out loud, your anxiety will spike, and your brain will beg you to mentally review your drive to prove you are innocent. Your job is to resist all mental checking and just stay with the story.

Copyright © 2026 by Richard Lam, LMFT (www.RLTherapy.com)

David: Okay. Here is what I wrote: "I am driving home at dusk and feel a sudden, heavy thud under my tires. A wave of panic hits me and my heart starts racing, but I force myself to keep driving and ignore the urge to check my mirrors. Hours later, I am sitting on the couch when flashing red and blue lights fill my living room window. A loud, aggressive pounding echoes from the front door. My stomach drops to the floor and my hands start shaking as I open it to find two police officers standing on my porch. They tell me that a witness caught my license plate after I critically injured a pedestrian and fled the scene. My chest feels suffocatingly tight and I can barely breathe as they pull my arms behind my back and click the cold metal handcuffs around my wrists. My family comes into the hallway, looking at me in complete horror, tears, and disgust. As the officers lead me out to the squad car in front of all my watching neighbors, I am consumed by overwhelming guilt and shame, realizing I am a careless monster who has permanently ruined an innocent person's life and destroyed my own future forever."
Therapist: That is a very brave script. How high is your distress right now as you read it?
David: Easily an 85 out of 100. I really want to remind myself that I checked my mirrors today.
Therapist: Just let the story be there, notice your tight chest, and read it again. We are going to record you reading this on your phone so you can listen to it on a loop for 30 minutes every day this week.

David committed to listening to his recording daily without doing any physical or mental checking. During the first few days, his distress stayed high around an 80. However, by the end of the week, something shifted. By confronting the horrific story repeatedly without using safety behaviors, David realized that thinking about a tragedy does not make it happen, and that he could tolerate the terrifying feelings of uncertainty and guilt without needing to check his car. Eventually, the script stopped shocking his nervous system and actually became boring, allowing him to drive to work in peace.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify the core feared thought, intrusive image, or memory that you have been trying to avoid or neutralize. What is the worst-case scenario or intolerable uncertainty your mind is warning you about?

Copyright © 2026 by Richard Lam, LMFT (www.RLTherapy.com)

Step 2. Write your Imaginal Exposure Script. Write a brief paragraph (about half a page) bringing this fear to life. To activate your brain's fear network so new learning can happen, follow these four rules:

- **Use First-Person, Present Tense:** Write it as if it is happening to you right now (e.g., "I am sitting...", not "It happened...").
- **Include Sensory and Emotional Details:** Describe what you see, hear, and feel in your body (e.g., "My heart is pounding, my hands are sweating, and I feel overwhelming shame").
- **Include the Core Consequence or Uncertainty:** Let the worst-case scenario play out in the story, or explicitly state that you will never know for sure if the bad outcome happened.
- **Zero Reassurance:** Do not give the story a happy ending or tell yourself it will be okay. Stop the story at the peak of the uncertainty or catastrophe.

Write your script below (or on a separate sheet of paper):

Step 3. Identify the Response Prevention. List any mental compulsions (such as mentally reviewing, praying, replacing a "bad" image with a "good" one, or reassuring yourself "it's just a story") that you must completely avoid while reading or listening:

Copyright © 2026 by Richard Lam, LMFT (www.RLTherapy.com)

Step 4. Read or listen on repeat. Read your script slowly out loud, or record it as a voice memo on your phone and listen to it on a continuous loop for 30 minutes a day. Fully picture the scene and allow yourself to feel the physical discomfort.

Step 5. Reflect on your new learning. After finishing your practice session, write down what you discovered. Did reading the words cause the event to happen in reality? Were you able to survive the distressing emotions without neutralizing them?

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **Thoughts Are Not Dangerous:** The primary goal of imaginal exposure is to break "thought-action fusion" (the false belief that having a dark thought is equivalent to doing it or making it come true). Facing the thought proves it is just ink on paper or sound waves in the air.
- **Do Not Speed-Read or Distract Yourself:** If you read the script like a robot or daydream while listening to the recording, your brain is using covert avoidance. Connect emotionally with the words and lean into the anxiety so inhibitory learning can take place.
- **Aim for Boredom or Tolerance, Not Instant Calm:** Remember that your anxiety (SUDs) does not have to drop to zero during a single session for the exercise to work. Over days of repetition, the story will lose its shock value, and you will learn that you can carry the thought without letting it boss you around.
- **Combine It (Deepened Extinction):** Once you get comfortable with your script, you can make the learning even stronger by listening to your recording while simultaneously entering a real-life situation that triggers you.

Final Note

Imaginal Exposure teaches us one of the most liberating truths in psychology: you do not have to control your thoughts in order to control your life. Our minds are remarkable storytelling machines capable of generating terrifying fiction. When we stop running from the ghosts in our imagination and instead turn around to look right at them, the ghosts lose their power. You prove to yourself that you are big enough to hold any thought, image, or memory, freeing you to live boldly in the real world.

Copyright © 2026 by Richard Lam, LMFT (www.RLTherapy.com)