

**A4: Personal experiments**

Remember that in OCD people are troubled by what we call intrusive thoughts, which become very difficult to stop thinking about and responding to. The content of these thoughts is usually very disturbing, and causes much anxiety. This is because people believe that the thoughts are likely to come true. Naturally, people do what they think is best to reduce the chances of the bad thing happening. This consists of compulsive behaviour, such as checking something over and over, cleaning excessively, 'neutralising' thoughts, or repeatedly asking for reassurance from another person.

The biggest problem with the completion of these rituals is that people never actually test out their beliefs. They tend to experience the upsetting thought, then respond to it as though it were true. Every time people have the upsetting thought and then complete a ritual, it makes them believe that the only reason the bad thing didn't happen is because the rituals protected them. It can seem too scary to try to resist the rituals and see what happens, but this is exactly what needs to occur in order to see improvement of OCD symptoms.

Although you have now learnt the theory that 'thoughts are just thoughts and cannot cause bad things to happen', you need to experience it to believe it, using personal experiments. Personal experiments are simply experiments that you work out with your therapist—experiments that allow you to test out your beliefs about certain bad things happening. The experiments need to be set up so that they are not so challenging that you can't complete them, but they also need to be challenging enough, and provoke some anxiety, so that they challenge your OCD beliefs. Below is an example of a client's personal experiment:

David experiences intrusive thoughts of his family members being in horrific accidents. He responds to these thoughts with rituals that involve only using even numbers. He believes that he must do everything in even numbers to prevent the thoughts from coming true. His therapist worked out an experiment where he asked David what he thought would happen if he wrote down some odd numbers on a piece of paper. David believed that his mother or father would be killed in an accident if he did this. David and his therapist agreed

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that it would be possible to test this belief out by writing down the numbers 1 and 3 on a piece of paper over and over for one minute. The test of the experiment would be whether a family member was killed in an accident, and the therapist would ask David about this at the next session.

When David returned a week later for his session, he reported that his family members were all alive and well, and that writing the odd numbers down did not result in any tragedies occurring. The therapist asked David what this meant in terms of his belief about avoiding odd numbers. David agreed that this experiment showed that using odd numbers does not increase the likelihood of anything bad happening to his family.

In order to test your beliefs, you will need to complete several different experiments, because it generally takes a while for the old beliefs to be eroded. However, after a while you will accumulate more and more evidence against your belief about bad things happening. It is especially useful to complete a metacognitive thought record after you have done the experiment and may be feeling a bit anxious. This will help you to get the most out of the experiment and feel less anxious.