

## **What is imaginal exposure?**

People with PTSD tend to avoid thinking about their painful experience because it eases some of the distress they feel. Although trying not to think about it feels better in the short run, it is unhelpful in the long run because avoidance prevents you from understanding and processing the memory of the trauma. As a result, it comes back to you in distressing ways, such as nightmares or intrusive thoughts.

Imaginal exposure involves helping you to confront the memories of your traumatic experience in a safe way and to come to terms with the experience. There are two important parts to imaginal exposure. First, by focusing on the memory you will learn that the memory of the trauma is just that, a memory – the event isn't happening again. You will learn that by staying with the memory instead of avoiding it your distress and anxiety will decrease. This is called habituation. Secondly, memory after a traumatic event tends to be confused and poorly organized. Focusing attention on the memories will help you organize and process the memories of the trauma. It will help you make sense of them so they fit together. This is called information processing.

### **Goals of Imaginal Exposure**

We are going to use imaginal exposure therapy to help you process and organize your memories of the traumatic event. Our ultimate goal is for you to be able to remember the trauma without experiencing overwhelming distress, as you do now. This can be achieved only by processing the trauma adequately. Your therapist's role in treatment is to help you process the memories at a pace that you can cope with.

### **Process of Imaginal Exposure**

During imaginal exposure your therapist will ask you to recall the memories of your trauma as vividly as possible. You will repeat this process a number of times in each session and you will practice throughout the week. It is often the case that when you go through the details of the event for the first time it is distressing. Over time, as you go through this process several times, however, your distress will decrease. Gradually, you will be able to think about the trauma without becoming overwhelmed with distress.

Imaginal therapy involves you closing your eyes and saying out loud what happened in as much detail as you remember. You will be asked to start at the beginning of the incident and continue through to the end, to a point where you felt relatively safe. This includes details about the surroundings, what you were doing, what happened to you, what thoughts were crossing your mind, how you felt emotionally, what physical sensations (like heart racing) you were experiencing, what you could hear, and even what you could smell. It is normal to feel uncomfortable and want to stop talking about it, but your therapist will be there to support you. You may experience some strong emotions as you are revisiting the traumatic memory. This is normal and is an important part of the exposure. It is important to remember that confronting the memories will not result in losing control or going crazy.

In order to enhance your ability to engage emotionally with your traumatic memory, you will be asked to recount your memory in present tense with your eyes closed. In the first session you may feel more comfortable recounting your memory with open eyes and in the past tense (e.g., "I was walking along the path when I saw him coming towards me"). This is OK. Gradually (perhaps over two or three sessions) you will be able to talk through the whole event with your eyes closed and in the present tense (e.g., "I am walking along the path and I can see him coming towards me"). It is important that you recount all the details that you can remember as vividly as possible, including the most distressing ones. You will repeat this process many times during your treatment. The more you go through your memory the more benefit you will have from the treatment, so your therapist will tape the session and ask you to listen to the tape every day at home.

## **SUDS Ratings**

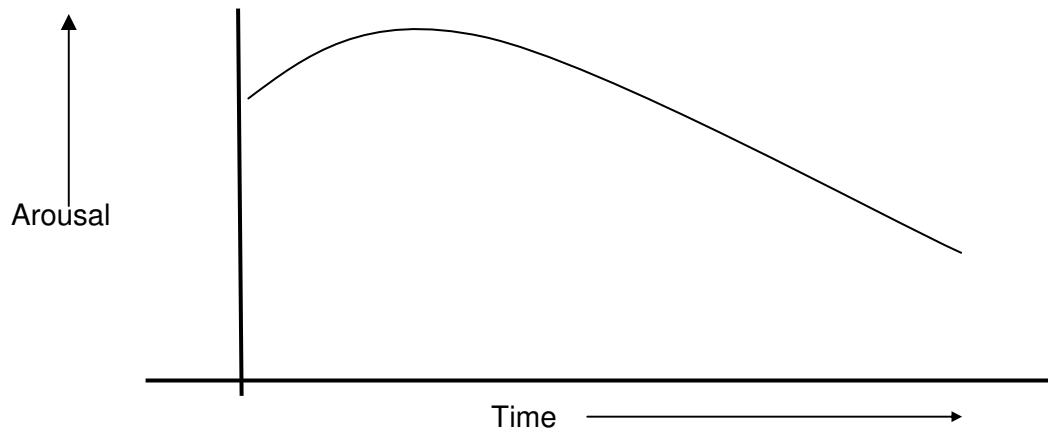
An important part of imaginal exposure is monitoring how you are feeling when you are doing the imaginal exposure. From time to time your therapist will ask you to indicate how anxious you are feeling. You do this by identifying a number on a scale of 0 to 100. On this scale, "0" means no anxiety (i.e., feeling extremely calm and relaxed), whereas "100" means feeling extremely distressed or anxious. Your therapist will teach you how to use this scale of "Subjective Units of Distress" which we call a SUDS scale. This scale will help you identify how distressed you are at any given moment.

## **Anxiety Reduction During and Between Exposure Curves**

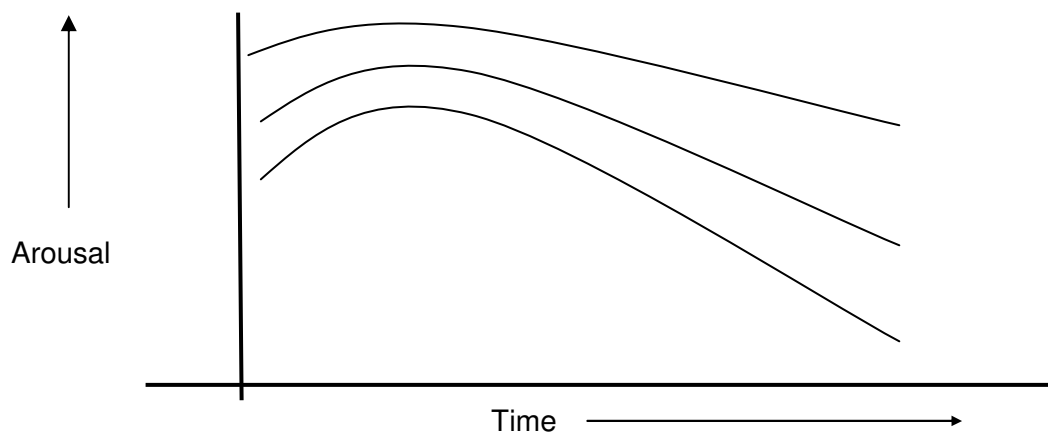
What typically happens is that, when you first start imaginal exposure, your anxiety or distress gradually increases. But by staying with the memory, and your therapist will help you do this, your anxiety will begin to drop (see Graph 1 on the following page). Sometimes, you will feel high distress as soon as you start recounting the memory and the distress will remain quite high throughout the imaginal exposure. This is OK and does not mean that you are not doing well. Each time you go through the memory in this way your distress or anxiety will get less and less as shown on Graph 2.

## **Concerns about Doing Imaginal Exposure**

Many people think that they will "go crazy" if they let themselves think about the trauma. This does not happen. Naturally, the thought of doing something that you have always avoided will be scary. It is important for you to remember that imaginal therapy is about processing and digesting the trauma. Initially it will be difficult but it is going to become easier over time and your therapist will be there to help you get through it.



Graph 1: Anxiety Reduction During Exposure



Graph 2: Anxiety Reduction Between Exposure Sessions