

Contamination Fears

Modalities Used: CBT, ERP

Objective

To help clients understand contamination-related obsessions and how ERP can address avoidance behaviors.

Introduction

- Many people experience fears about germs or illness, but contamination OCD goes beyond typical hygiene.
- Today we'll explore how contamination fears show up in OCD and how rituals like handwashing reinforce the anxiety.
- We'll also introduce ERP tools to help break the cycle safely and gradually.

Psychoeducation

Contamination OCD involves obsessions about dirt, germs, illness, or feeling 'unclean'—often accompanied by compulsions like excessive handwashing, cleaning, or avoidance.

The fear is usually not just about getting sick but about the anxiety or distress caused by feeling contaminated.

Compulsions provide short-term relief but reinforce long-term anxiety.

ERP for contamination OCD involves planned exposures to feared situations while resisting compulsions like washing.

Skill Building

Create a list of situations the client avoids due to contamination fears.

Choose one low-level exposure (e.g., touching a doorknob and waiting 2 minutes before washing).

Use a timer to track anxiety and discuss how it changes without the compulsion.

Reflection & Discussion

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- What's your usual response to contamination triggers?
- How did your anxiety shift during the ERP activity?
- What would it feel like to go one step further next time?

Homework (Choose one)

- Track one contamination trigger this week and delay the compulsion by 1 minute.
- Journal about a small exposure attempt and your anxiety before, during, and after.
- List all the things you avoided this week due to contamination fears.

Contamination OCD Worksheet

Use this worksheet during or after your session to reflect on your OCD subtype and apply the skill learned.

Prompt Sections:

Describe a recent contamination fear or trigger:

What was the compulsion or avoidance behavior?

What exposure did you try today?

How anxious did you feel before, during, and after the exposure?

Reflection Questions:

- What did you learn from doing the exposure?

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- Was the anxiety worse or better than expected?
- What would you try next time?