

In Vivo Exposure for Sexual Obsessions

The following is adapted from *The Imp of the Mind: Exploring the Silent Epidemic of Obsessive Bad Thoughts* by Lee Baer

Dr. Joseph Ciarrocchi, an expert in the treatment of religious obsessions at Loyola College in Maryland, described in detail his successful exposure treatment of a patient with a strict religious upbringing who was suffering from sexual obsessions:

A thirty-seven-year-old homosexual Baptist man who lived a celibate life was plagued by constant worries around intrusive sexual thoughts. Although he was physically attracted only to adult men, he had severe obsessions of paedophilia. Whenever he saw a handsome young man, he began to worry that he might not be older than eighteen years of age. He was so concerned about having sexual thoughts toward underage boys that he avoided looking at any man who was not obviously older than approximately thirty years of age. This obsession was most bothersome during church services, because the notion of having sexual thoughts about minors in church was horrific. As a result, he gazed with a fixed stare at the minister, lest his eyes wander and he be guilty of the sin of paedophilia.

Stage I of his exposure program involved obtaining a large department-store catalogue. Therapist and patient then went through the fashions for adult men, selecting approximately ten pictures of men modelling business wear, casual wear, and beach attire. The patient then rank-ordered the pictures according to the degree of distress each picture generated, from least to most anxiety-provoking, with no large gaps in anxiety between any two pictures. Exposure then began in the therapist's office with the patient staring at the least anxiety-provoking picture until anxiety was sufficiently reduced. This process continued until desensitization was achieved for all the pictures.

Stage 2 used the same catalogue, but this time the pictures were selected from the adolescent fashion section. Again, the patient chose a range of pictures from dress clothes to beach wear, and exposure then proceeded in the same manner as described earlier. During both stages, the patient continued exposure trials at home, although it took several weeks of in-house sessions before he had sufficient self-confidence to try it on his own.

Stage 3 involved in vivo exposure in natural environments. Now instead of avoiding looking at young men, the patient was instructed to actively seek them out and to look at them in a natural way.

Stage 4 involved performing the same exposure with adolescent men, and Stage 5 involved purposely looking at young men and teenage boys during church services. (Television programs often provide useful exposure trials, because scenes that scrupulous people avoid are readily available.)