

Accidentally poisoning her son and being rejected by family and society

Anna worried that she would kill her infant son by touching him with hands contaminated by bacteria from uncooked meat or eggs. This had all but paralyzed her so that when she came for treatment, she refused to feed him or to change his diaper. Although in vivo exposure had enabled her to hold her son to feed and change him, her bad thoughts about killing him continued. For Anna, only a tailor-made audio-tape would provide adequate exposure for her specific fears.

I convinced Anna that to complete her treatment she would have to expose herself to the very catastrophe she was most afraid of. She began by writing out for me, in excruciating detail, precisely the worst thing that she feared would happen to her infant. At our next session I reviewed what she'd written on two sheets of yellow legal paper, which I've paraphrased and shortened here to give you the flavour of an effective exposure script:

I didn't wash my hands properly after cooking chicken. I feed my son, and later that day I notice he is not breathing right, as if his throat is closing up. I also take his temperature and he is getting a fever. I drive him to the emergency room and tell the doctor there what happened. He tells me that I probably gave my baby a bacterial infection and that he will probably not survive. I sit next to my baby's crib in the hospital and listen to him wheezing and having trouble breathing. He looks up at me with pleading eyes, and I know he's asking me to protect him and I know there's nothing I can do to help him. I cry continuously and feel more and more helpless and guilty. Over the next several hours I see my son dying from this poison in his body that I gave him. Finally, he dies a horrible death. My husband arrives at the hospital, and when he finds out what has happened, he yells at me hysterically and blames me for being an irresponsible mother who killed her own son. My mother and father tell me they want nothing more to do with me after I was so irresponsible in taking care of their grandson. My husband leaves me. I become homeless, live in a shelter, and become an alcoholic. After several years I realize there is nothing more to live for and I commit suicide.

When I read the first draft of Anna's script, I noticed that she had included several reassurances, which I pointed out to her and then crossed out (such phrases as "but I tell myself this really isn't happening" or "God forbid this would ever happen to him"). I told Anna that it would be uncomfortable for her to listen to this script at first; however, I assured her that as she listened to it over and over, it would eventually lose its ability to upset her. Then for the first time she could enjoy taking care of her son, which was Anna's original treatment goal. Anna then read her script into a tape recorder, repeating it three or four times until she had filled a thirty-minute side of a sixty-minute audiotape. She then slipped her tape into her portable tape player and listened to it for at least one hour every day. Happily, within a week, Anna told me that listening to the tape no longer produced strong discomfort, and soon the bad thoughts that had accompanied feeding and changing

her son were almost gone. Now, a year later, she tells me that she and her son are doing well, and she is enjoying taking care of him and watching him grow up.

Adapted from: 'The Imp of the Mind: Exploring the Silent Epidemic of Obsessive Bad Thoughts' by Lee Baer