

Understanding Exposure & Response Prevention

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) combines deliberate contact with a feared trigger and a planned reduction in the response that has been keeping the fear cycle going.

Exposure

Exposure means approaching a thought, image, object, situation, uncertainty or body sensation that has become linked with fear. It should be collaborative, informed and paced.

Response prevention

Response prevention means reducing or delaying the ritual, avoidance, checking, reassurance seeking, escape or other response used to neutralise the fear. It is not about withholding legitimate care or accessibility support.

The learning model

If the feared trigger always leads to an immediate safety response, the brain has little opportunity to discover what happens without that response. ERP creates space for new learning: uncertainty can be tolerated, anxiety changes over time, and feared predictions do not always occur.

Important distinction

ERP is strongly associated with treatment for OCD, but exposure-based principles are also used across anxiety problems. The exact method should match the difficulty rather than applying an OCD protocol to every fear.

Map the cycle

A simple cycle

Trigger → threatening meaning → anxiety or discomfort → ritual / avoidance / reassurance → short-term relief → stronger belief that the response was necessary.

Find your response

The response is not always obvious. It may include mental reviewing, repeatedly checking your body, asking another person for certainty, avoiding words or images, researching for reassurance, escaping a place, or repeating an action until it feels “right.”

Worksheet

- Trigger: _____
- What my mind says it means: _____
- Feeling / body response: _____
- What I usually do next: _____
- Short-term effect: _____
- Long-term effect: _____

Choose one change

Rather than removing every response at once, identify one response you could safely reduce, delay or vary.

Planning an ERP experiment

Set the experiment

Name the feared trigger and the response you intend to reduce. Decide what you are willing to practise and what remains outside the exercise.

Use predictions

Write down what you think will happen if you do not perform the usual response. This turns the exercise into a learning experiment rather than an endurance test.

During the exercise

- Allow uncertainty rather than trying to prove absolute safety.
- Notice urges without treating them as commands.
- Avoid replacing one ritual with a new hidden ritual.
- Stay curious about what changes and what does not.
- Stop for genuine safety reasons, not because anxiety alone is uncomfortable.

After the exercise

Record what happened, what you learned and whether the original prediction changed. The goal is broader behavioural freedom, not a particular anxiety score.

Using ERP responsibly

ERP should not remove real-world safety

Response prevention does not mean ignoring medical advice, abandoning disability adjustments, breaking laws, taking reckless risks or withholding essential support.

Trauma and neurodivergence

Some people need adaptations for sensory processing, communication, trauma history, interoception or demand sensitivity. A collaborative approach can separate a necessary accommodation from a fear-maintaining ritual rather than assuming all support should be removed.

Professional support

A suitably trained therapist can help when compulsions are complex, mental rituals are hard to identify, fear is severe, trauma is involved, or self-directed practice repeatedly becomes unmanageable.

Take-away

The heart of ERP is learning through experience: meeting a feared trigger by choice and changing the response that has been reinforcing the cycle. It should increase freedom, not become another rule that has to be performed perfectly.