S5C4. Imaginal exposures / Scripts

Sometimes it is not going to be possible for you to expose yourself directly to your trigger. For example, one of your obsessions may be '*What if my partner is cheating on me?*' In order to expose yourself to the trigger in-vivo, since you cannot actually get your partner to cheat on you, you can use imaginal exposures. You can expose yourself to the thought of being in the situation. You can do so more fully when you are imagining it and that can prove to be very effective. You could think of the outcome of your partner's cheating, how it will affect your life, your self-esteem and your relationships. Paint the worst scenario possible and expose yourself to it repeatedly to get habituated to it.

Sometimes, some fears may be possible for you to get exposed to in-vivo, but you may not be ready for them yet. Even for those, you can use imaginal exposures first and desensitize yourself to the thought before you take action on them. For example, you may be triggered at the thought of introducing your partner to your family because of the fear that your partner may not create a good impression on your family. In such a case, you may use imaginal exposures and create scenarios in your mind about the meeting going wrong. How your partner becomes a laughing stock, how that affects you, how your family scoffs at you for your poor choice - the worst it can get in your mind.

The simplest yet a very powerful way to do imaginal exposures, is through scripts. A script is a small write up on the worst possible outcome of your trigger, starting with your 'what-if' statements coming true. So, if you fear that your partner may cheat on you, your script could start with the statement '*My partner has cheated on me*'.

This is followed by what happens to you. Statements like '*We are fighting, my partner is laughing at me as I am crying and telling me I was never her first choice*' or '*I am crying and speaking to my mother and instead of understanding my distress, my mother is insisting that my partner has done the right thing because I am not good enough*' should be a part of the script.

As you may have noted, the statements are in the present tense and not in the future tense. Say '*this is happening to me*', rather than '*this will happen to me*'. Second, also note that there cannot be an escape hatch. Nothing that eases the situation is allowed to be in the script. For example, in the first statement, an escape hatch would be '*We are fighting and my partner is trying to calm me down and apologizing to me as I am crying*'. In the second statement, the escape hatch would be '*I am crying and speaking to my mother and she understands and is telling me I deserve better*'. Escape hatches dilute the script and render them ineffective.

Third, scripts are like every other form of writing much better if they show

and not tell. Thus, painting a picture with words about where you are how everything looks around you, how your partner's perfume makes you go crazy as you hear the bad news, real names and situations would make the script more effective.

Sometimes when you write a script and read it back to yourself you may arrive at the core fear more easily. For example, when you write in the script that your mother is also not being understanding, when you re-read it, you may realize that it is that rather than being cheated on that causes you more distress. This is helpful as more exposures can be customized around this. You can edit the script and make this part more vivid and anxiety inducing.

Once the script is made, and you have edited out the escape hatches and expanded on what affects you the most, read and reread the script. Absorb the essence rather than just read the words. Make sure that the script is causing you anxiety. If you want, record the script in your own voice and listen to it on loop. After reading the script it or listening to the recording enough number of times, you will begin to feel desensitized to that particular trigger.

Worksheet 17 will help you distinguish between an appropriate statement for a script and a statement with an escape hatch. Also Additional Resource 8 has two examples of how an imaginal script may be written.

In the next chapter, we shall talk about another type of exposure called interoceptive exposure.

To-Do:
Complete WS17 - the escape hatch exercise
Read through AR8 - the imaginal script examples