Module 6: Overestimation of threat

People with OCD often overestimate the likelihood of threats or bad events. Reasons can be:

▶ Inaccurate information
  - Example: Some parents overestimate the likelihood of threats in order to teach their children to be careful (e.g., risk of fire if lights are not turned off)
  - This may promote increased anxiety in children!

▶ Unrealistic pessimism
  - People with OCD estimate their personal risk to be greater in many areas (e.g., general risk of illness) in comparison to others

▶ Negative view of future
  - One negative event is used to infer future events: "When it rains, it pours. What happened once will happen again and again."
  - Thus, wrong or exaggerated conclusions are drawn
  - This can promote avoidance behavior

▶ Catastrophizing
  - People with OCD usually amplify the negative consequences of events much more than people without OCD
  - They do not "think through" the concerns: They always fear the worst and perform compulsions whenever fear or anxiety occurs

What can you do?

▶ Try to think your fears through to their logical or realistic end
▶ Think through the consequences of your biggest concern (e.g., Making a mistake at work). Many fears, when viewed in the light of day, do not appear to be as devastating as when they first occur

Aim: Inform yourself!

▶ If possible, always consider all aspects of your fears, do not focus only on the negative consequences, instead take into account other less catastrophic or even neutral possibilities
  - Gather the relevant information. Check reliable sources to find out what factors weigh against your fears
  - Inform yourself not only about the worst case, but also about less catastrophic, neutral, or even positive outcomes of a situation
  - Consider alternative explanations
  - When you find a probability for an event, also consider the counter probability
**Exercise 1:** Fill in the table with your own examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obsession</th>
<th>Estimated probability?</th>
<th>New information, search result</th>
<th>Alternative thoughts and counter probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming infected with HIV</td>
<td>Many people have died from HIV/AIDS, so it must be very likely to contract it and then die as well</td>
<td>The vast majority of people do not contract HIV</td>
<td>The probability of not contracting the disease is above 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe 30 %</td>
<td>Lifetime prevalence &lt; 1%</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS mortality rates are declining every year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is no indication that I might be ill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How likely is the feared event?**

- Many people with checking compulsions overestimate this probability
- The actual probability can be approximated statistically. By connecting the individual probabilities of the necessary preconditions for this event
- This is done mathematically by multiplication
Example: Burglary in your own apartment

- The probability that an attempt is ever made to break into an apartment is statistically (set high) around 10%.
- The probability that the door is open and no one is at home may be higher: maybe 20%.
- The probability that a burglar will visit your neighborhood just tomorrow is also perhaps 20%, if taken to a high level.
- That of all places your house/apartment is targeted is perhaps 40% likely at high estimate.

To calculate the probability that a burglar will break into your apartment tomorrow, you must now multiply these individual probabilities and therefore this event is **0.16%** likely!

\[(0.1\times 0.2 \times 0.2 \times 0.4) = 0.0016\]

**Exercise 2:**
Calculate probability

Identify factors that must come together for a feared event to occur. Each influencing factor has a certain probability from 0.01 (= 1%) via 0.5 (= 50%) up to 1 (= 100%) and is to be multiplied with other factors. Each additional factor/condition reduces the probability of occurrence considerably.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative event</th>
<th>Each probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1:</td>
<td>_______ % = _______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2:</td>
<td>_______ % = _______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3:</td>
<td>_______ % = _______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 4:</td>
<td>_______ % = _______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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**Factor 5:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_______ %</th>
<th>= _______</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The product results from the multiplication (x) of the numbers above:

0,____ x 0,____ x 0,____ x 0,____ x 0,____ = 0,____ (for example, 0.5 means 50%)

This is equivalent to ______%.

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**Recognize and account for overestimation**

- Ask people you know and compare it with your own estimation
- Always keep in mind that you may tend to overestimate the likelihood of a negative event
- Consider that many individual factors must coincide at the same time for your worst fear to come true
- Usually this is very, very unlikely

**Supplement: Ruminating**

Many people with depression, and also with OCD, complain of endless ruminating, brooding and worrying. Features of rumination are the following:

- **Content:**
  - Ruminating over "Why?" (e.g.: The reason for a sickness)
  - Ruminating over past events
  - Ruminating over the fact that you are ruminating

- **Type and Manner:**
  - While ruminating it's hard to find an end and we often go around in circles (propagating "endless loops")
  - there is a risk of losing awareness of the fact that you are ruminating
  - there is usually no "solution" (the difference from problem solving)
  - actions rarely follow (the difference from planning)
  - thinking is often abstract, general and unspecific

Ruminating is not the same as contemplating or planning!
Exercise 3:
Think of a strategy you want to use when you ruminate, such as a physical exercise.

What strategy helps you stop you from ruminating?
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Notes
Space for unanswered questions or problems that have come up or experiences that you would like to talk about in the next session:
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Other notes:
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________