

Understanding Imaginal Exposure

Why Would We Talk About Painful Memories?

One of the most common questions people ask is:

"Why would I want to talk about something I've spent years trying to forget?"

It's a very understandable question.

After trauma, most people naturally try to avoid anything that reminds them of what happened. Avoidance can include memories, thoughts, emotions, places, people or conversations. Whilst this often brings short-term relief, it can unintentionally keep PTSD symptoms going.

Imaginal Exposure is a carefully structured therapy that helps you process traumatic memories in a safe, gradual and supported way. Rather than forcing you to relive the trauma, the aim is to help your brain recognise that the danger belongs in the past, not the present.

Will I have to relive my trauma?

No.

Although talking about traumatic experiences can feel emotional, therapy is not about overwhelming you or asking you to repeatedly suffer through painful memories.

Instead, we work together at a pace that feels manageable. Over time, many people discover that the memories become less distressing and begin to feel like something that happened to them, rather than something they are continually experiencing.

The goal is not to erase the memory—you will always remember what happened—but to reduce the emotional intensity it carries so it no longer controls your everyday life.

How does Imaginal Exposure help?

As therapy progresses, many people notice several important changes.

Making sense of the memory

Traumatic memories are often stored in fragments rather than as a clear story. They can feel confusing, disconnected or incomplete.

Working with the memory helps your brain organise what happened, allowing it to become part of your life story rather than something that continually intrudes into the present.

Reducing distress over time

When we gently approach memories instead of avoiding them, the brain gradually learns that remembering is not dangerous.

Many people find that the emotional intensity of flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts begins to lessen as therapy progresses.

Understanding the difference between remembering and reliving

One of the hallmarks of PTSD is that memories can feel as though the traumatic event is happening all over again.

Imaginal Exposure helps your brain recognise an important distinction:

Remembering a traumatic event is distressing, but it is not the same as being in danger again.

This understanding often reduces fear and helps people feel more grounded in the present.

Building confidence

Trauma can leave people feeling powerless or as though their lives are controlled by fear.

As you begin facing memories that once felt impossible to approach, many people develop a stronger sense of confidence and discover they are far more resilient than they believed.

Reducing avoidance

Fear often spreads after trauma.

For example, after one frightening experience, someone may begin avoiding many situations that are actually safe. Over time, life can become increasingly restricted.

As the trauma is processed, many of these fears naturally begin to reduce, allowing people to reconnect with relationships, activities and experiences that are important to them.

A helpful way to think about it

Imagine you've packed a painful memory into a sealed box.

For years you've done everything possible to keep the lid tightly closed because opening it feels frightening. Holding the lid down takes enormous energy.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the contents begin to leak out as nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety or intrusive thoughts.

Rather than spending your life trying to hold the lid shut, therapy gently opens the box in a safe and controlled way. Together we look at what is inside, make sense of it, and help your brain realise that these memories no longer need to be feared.

Once the memories have been processed, they no longer need to force their way into your daily life.

My approach

Although Imaginal Exposure has a clear evidence base, I believe that healing happens through safety, trust and collaboration.

Before beginning any trauma processing, we will ensure you have the emotional resources and coping strategies needed to feel supported throughout the process. We move at a pace that feels right for you, and you remain in control throughout therapy.