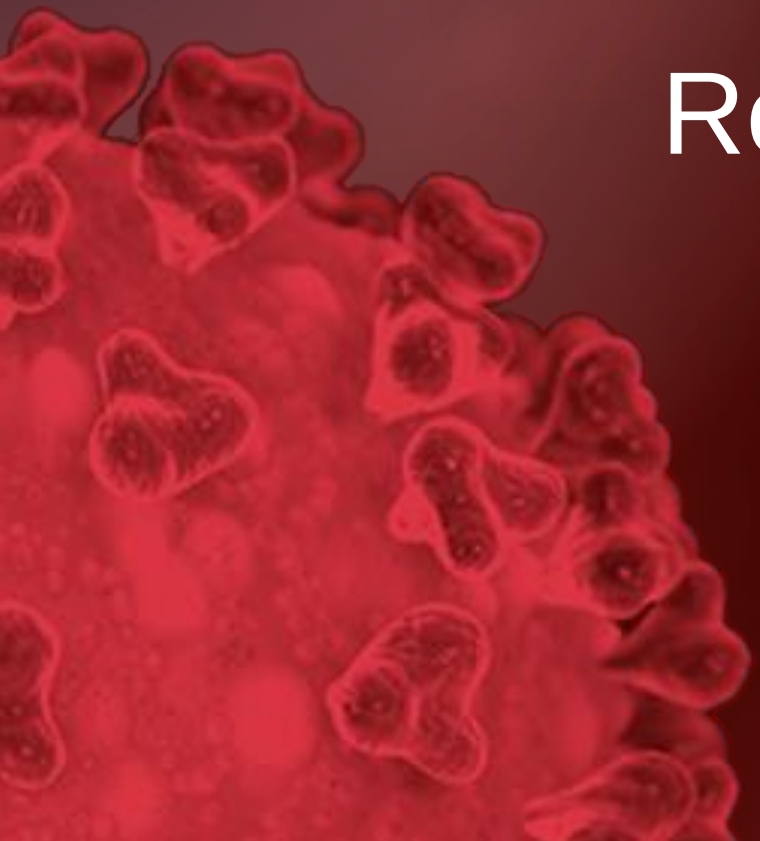
Anxiety During COVID

John Wunderlich, Psy.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist
Center for OCD and Anxiety Related Disorders
St. Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute
Nov. 10th, 2020

Overview of Presentation

Anxiety During COVID:

- Contamination–related distress
  - Diagnostic changes since COVID
  - Altered treatment recommendations during COVID
- Social Anxiety Disorder
  - Psychoeducation and MI: Avoidance vs Exposure
  - Social exposures during COVID
- Topics for Further Discussion



Respect of Individual Differences

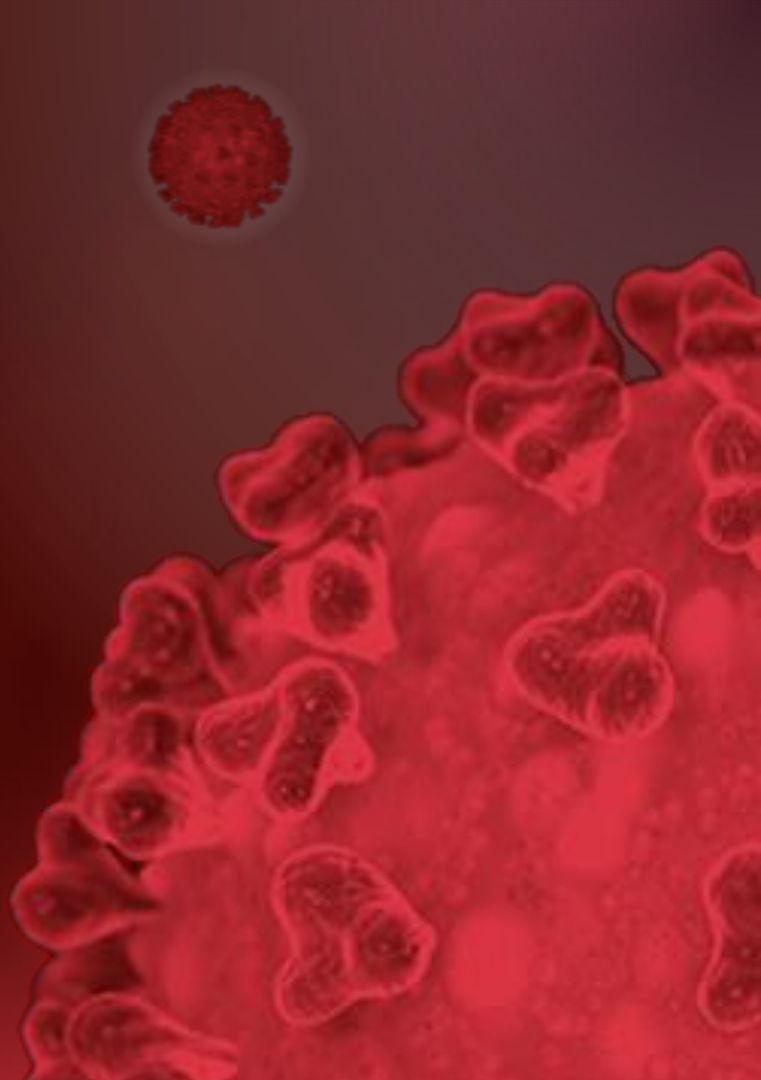
This pandemic is an opportunity to model non-judgementalness and openness to the values and decisions of others.

The statements in this presentation are not intended to be predjudicial to anyone’s pandemic response.

Diagnostic considerations in contamination–related distress

COVID has affected the diagnostic standards of:

OCD
Agoraphobia
GAD
Adjustment D/O



Maladaptive behaviors may have become adaptive.

Washing
Checking
Tracking
Researching/Planning

Diagnostic Considerations

01.

Functional

Have distress, mood, and QoL improved over the months?

02.

Flexible

Do they exhibit flexilibty in their safety behaviors, or are they perfectionistic?

03.

Volitional

Are safety behaviors driven by emotion in the moment or by calmly deliberated rules?

04.

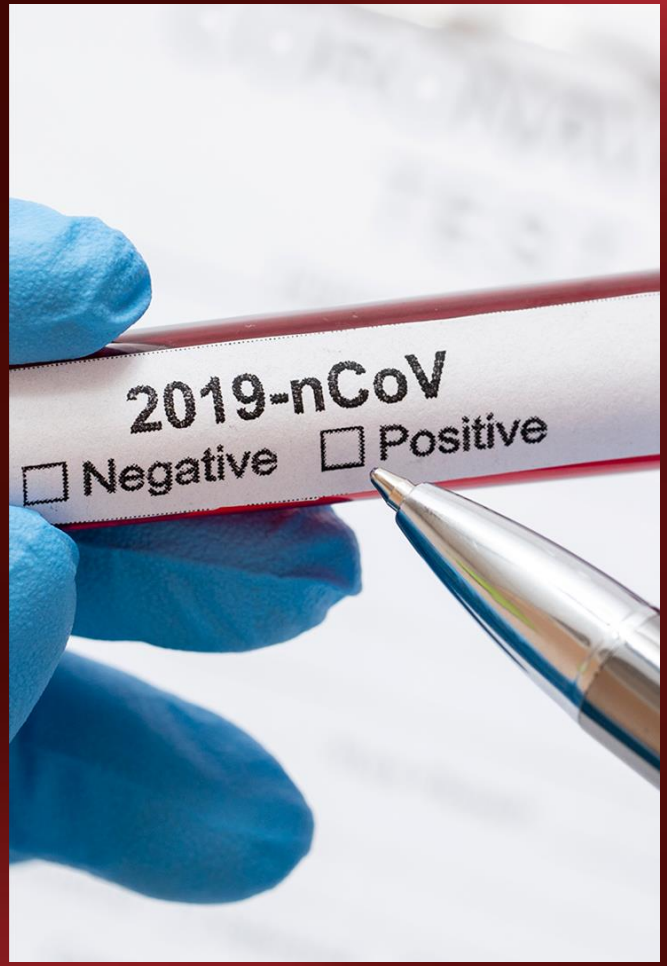
Tolerable

Is the distress experienced as tolerable, or does the patient engage in emotional avoidance and thought suppression?

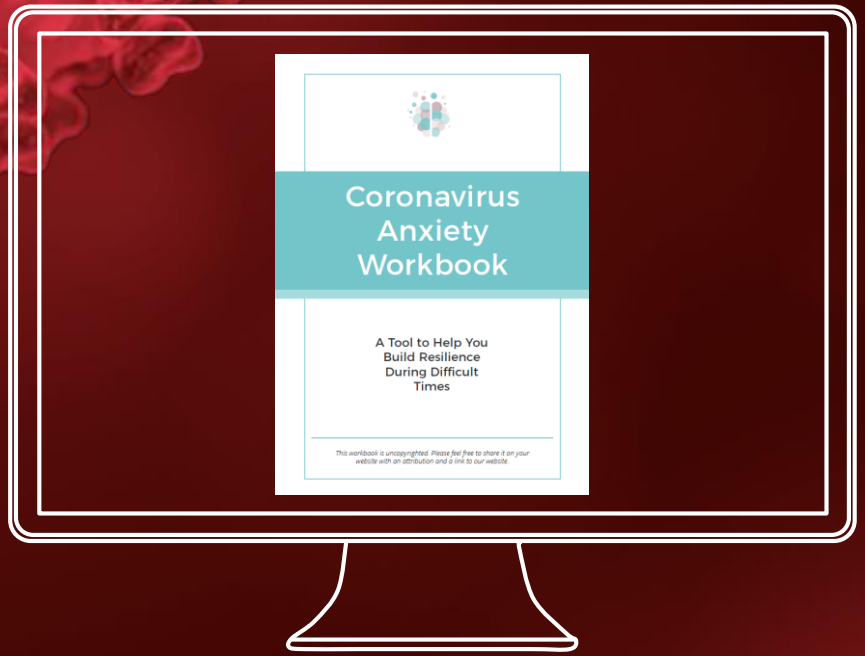
5. Certainty Seeking

Certainty seeking is a common form of avoidance seen in individuals with poor tolerance of uncertainty.

It can take the form of reassurance seeking from family or medical providers, researching, or worrying/figuring-out.



Treatment for Contamination-Related Distress



Free Workbook

As a first-line intervention with minimal demands on your time, a workbook may be appropriate for mild cases.

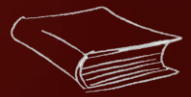
CONTENTS

1 Introduction
5 Planning Your Information Diet
7 My Spheres of Influence Worksheet
8 Practical Wisdom for Tolerating Uncertainty
9 Reducing Anxiety With Thought Challenging
10 Reducing Anxiety Through Distraction Activities
15 Starting a Planning Practice
18 Starting a Daily Gratitude Practice
20 Starting a Daily Breathing Practice
21 Improving the Quality of Your Social Connections
22 Developing a Regular Exercise Routine
23 Creating Your Stress-Resilience Action Plan
25 Further Resources

Treatment for Contamination-Related Distress

Create Limits for Avoidant Behaviors

Create time limits and/or schedules for washing, checking, and tracking.



Planning

Replace worry with timed and/or scheduled researching and planning.

Imaginal Exposure

Create imaginal scripts of worse case scenarios, and do repeated exposures.

Non-specific instructions put no limit on patients' behavior

Wash your hands with an alcohol-based sanitizer or with soap and water

Keep a distance of at least 1 meter between yourself and anyone who coughs or sneezes

Try your best not to touch your eyes, your nose and your mouth

Cover your mouth and your nose with your bent elbow or a tissue when coughing

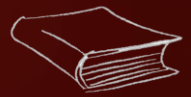
Seek medical attention if you have difficulty breathing and a high fever

Follow the directions of your national or local health authorities

Treatment for Contamination-Related Distress

Create Limits for Avoidant Behaviors

Create time limits and/or schedules for washing, checking, and tracking.



Planning

Replace worry with timed and/or scheduled researching and planning.

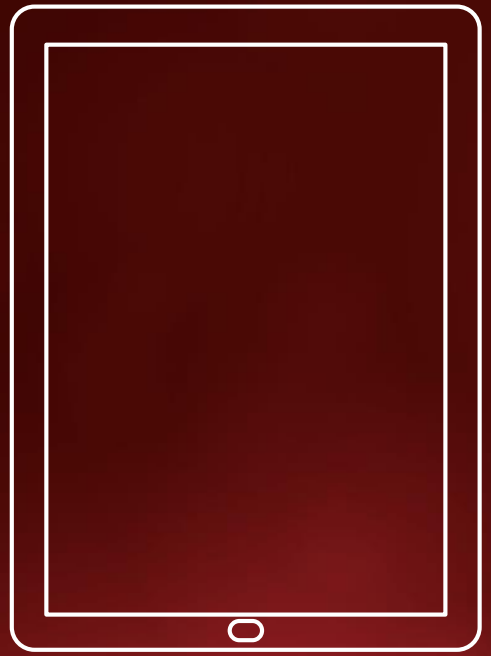
Imaginal Exposure

Create imaginal scripts of worse case scenarios, and do repeated exposures.

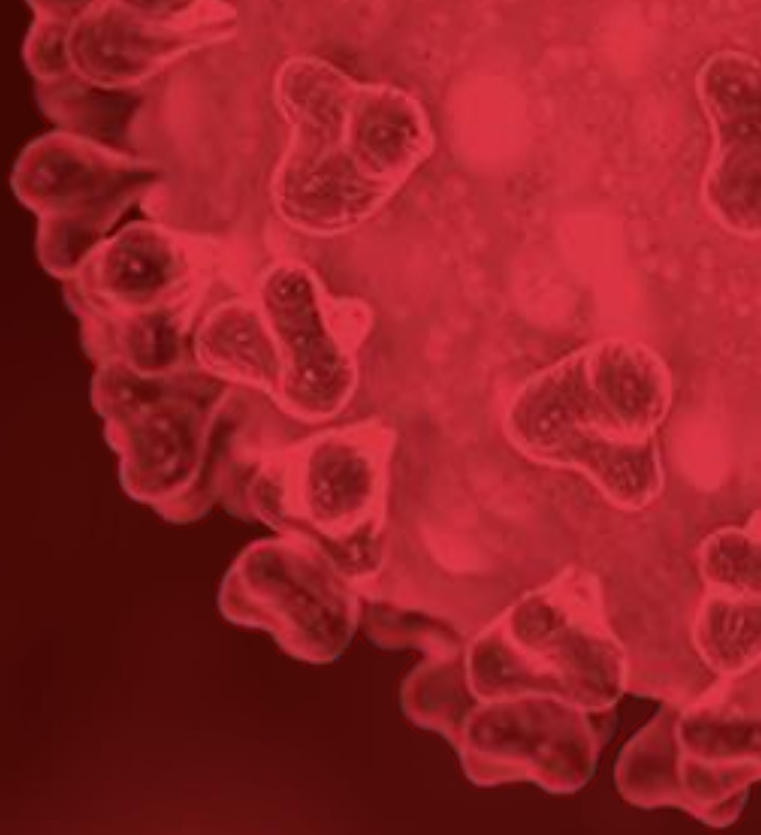
Treatment for Contamination-Related Distress

Doubt Scripts

Repeatedly istening to statements such as “I cannot know if I or my family will die from COVID,” can develop tolerance of the feared uncertainty.



Social Anxiety Disorder



Psychoeducation

Avoidance

Avoiding social interaction prevents a patient from learning to tolerate their fear and can reinforce maladptive beliefs like “I cannot tolerate social judgement.”

Exposure

Facing our fears provides opportunities to learn that we can tolerate the trigger.

Exposure (Continued)

Behavioral Mechanism:

Extinction of conditioned fear responses.

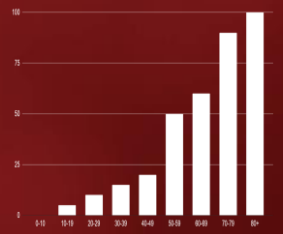
Cognitive Mechanism:

Corrects dysfunctional beliefs.

Changes in Self-efficacy:

Patients learn they can function and cope without avoidance.

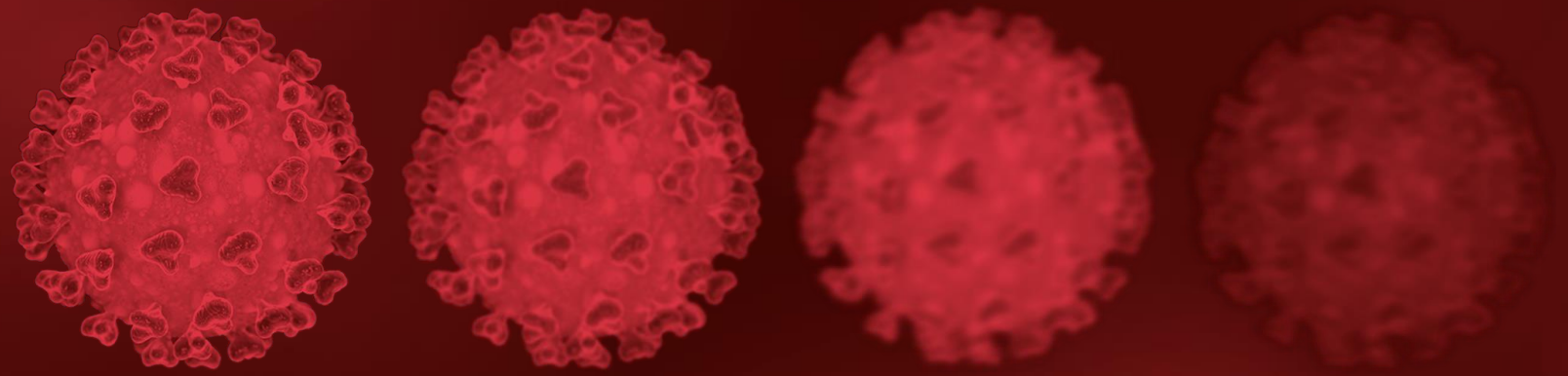
MI or Utility Analysis



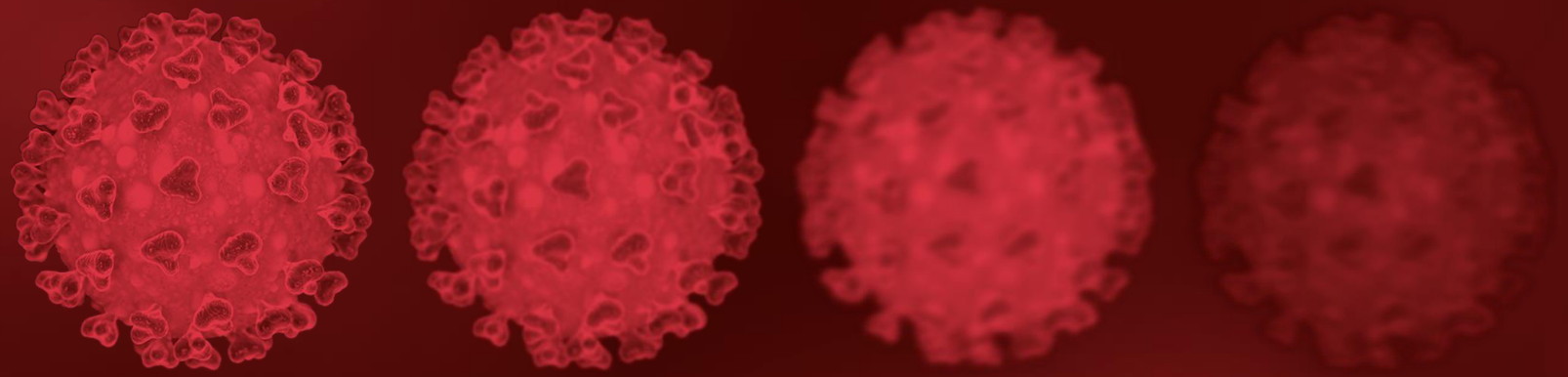
Patients may be able to identify that their social anxiety has increased over the course of the pandemic.

Reattributing the increase in symptoms to avoidance helps motivate patients to try exposure.

Social exposures during COVID



Topics for Further Discussion?



slidesgo