

Using Tetris as a Between-Session Tool to Reduce Intrusive Trauma Memories

A Clinician Resource · Atrium Clinic Gaming Therapies

GAMING THERAPIES

Atrium Clinic

Evidence: Tetris occupies visuospatial working memory, competing with the brain's image-consolidation process (Holmes et al., 2010). RCTs show significant reductions in intrusive memories when used within days to weeks of trauma (Iyadurai et al., 2018 — Nature Human Behaviour; Horsch et al., 2017). Greatest benefit within 6 weeks post-trauma.

WHO IT'S FOR

- ▶ Adults or adolescents (14+) with recent trauma (within 6 weeks) reporting visual intrusive memories or flashbacks
- ▶ No active psychosis, significant dissociation, or seizure history
- ▶ Suitable alongside trauma-focused therapy or while awaiting treatment — PTSD diagnosis not required

HOW TO USE — SIX STEPS

- 1. Introduce:** Explain: 'Tetris may help reduce upsetting images by occupying the brain's picture-making system.'
- 2. Consent:** Confirm the client understands this supports but does not replace trauma therapy.
- 3. Trigger:** Client briefly brings the traumatic memory to mind for ~2 minutes (no detailed verbal processing).
- 4. Play Tetris:** Client plays for 10–20 minutes immediately after Step 3. Any version; free apps available.
- 5. Monitor:** Client keeps a brief daily diary rating intrusion frequency and distress (1–10). Review at next session.
- 6. Repeat:** 1–3 sessions per week for 3–6 weeks. Can be self-administered at home with written guidance.

CANDIDATE SCREENING

- ▶ Confirm visual intrusive memories are present (not purely auditory or somatic)
- ▶ Exclude: DES-II ≥ 30 (dissociation), active psychosis, or seizure history before proceeding
- ▶ Suitable for sub-threshold presentations — PTSD diagnosis not required

SAFETY & CONTRAINDICATIONS

- ▶ Pause if distress, dissociation, or intrusions worsen after two sessions; review and seek supervision
- ▶ Do not use during acute grief without clinical supervision
- ▶ Not a replacement for EMDR, TF-CBT, or other evidence-based trauma therapies
- ▶ Photosensitive clients: use alternative visuospatial task (e.g. Candy Crush)

REMOTE DELIVERY

Fully compatible with online sessions. Share written instructions beforehand. Client plays Tetris independently after briefly recalling the memory at the close of the video call. Debrief at next appointment.

KEY REFERENCES

- Holmes EA et al. (2010). Can playing Tetris reduce flashback build-up? PLoS ONE 5(1):e8769.
- Iyadurai L et al. (2018). Preventing intrusive memories after trauma via Tetris. Nature Human Behaviour 2:428–442.
- Horsch A et al. (2017). Reducing intrusive memories after emergency caesarean: RCT. Behav Res Ther 93:1–6.
- Varma P et al. (2024). Imagery-competing tasks for intrusive memories: meta-analysis.