

A6: Intrusive thoughts, part 1

THE FACTS ABOUT UPSETTING AND UNWANTED (INTRUSIVE) THOUGHTS

As you know, we are constantly thinking; it really never stops. Sometimes we are less aware of our thoughts than at other times. We sometimes experience what are known as ‘intrusive thoughts’, or thoughts that just seem to pop into our heads when we are not really expecting them. These thoughts are best considered as random brain activity, as your brain simply exercising itself. This activity can include spontaneous thoughts about absolutely anything, from nonsensical things like images of you wearing a large funny hat or bouncing down the street on a pogo stick, to inspiring thoughts about yourself standing on the winner’s podium at the Olympics.

However, because the brain is randomly exercising itself, it will sometimes produce very upsetting or disturbing thoughts or images; for example, imagining your own funeral or images of throwing yourself off a bridge. Obviously, the nonsensical and inspiring thoughts and images are easy to accept, and you might find yourself privately chuckling about them when they occur. However, the disturbing ones are often less easy to deal with. We know that people under stress tend to have a higher frequency of negative intrusive thoughts. For some people, the content of these thoughts can be so distressing that they focus on them and begin to question what they mean.

For example, a common upsetting intrusive thought is of having sex with someone you shouldn’t have sex with, or hurting or killing someone you care about. Studies have proven that just about everyone reports these kinds of thoughts from time to time. However, these thoughts become a problem when they are given some kind of negative meaning such as, ‘I am a bad person for thinking this; I must stop myself from ever thinking this again.’

Unfortunately, the mere act of trying *not* to think of the upsetting thought again results in the very opposite thing happening: the thoughts come back even more frequently. So, in order to help you overcome your difficulties with these thoughts, we must lessen your preoccupation with them, not by trying to push them away but rather by just acknowledging what they are: brain activity; just

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thoughts; nothing more. Rather than push them away, you will be asked to simply let them occur; don't fight them, just remind yourself of the fact: 'They are *just* thoughts'.

WHY ARE SOME THOUGHTS MORE UPSETTING THAN OTHERS?

Usually thoughts are most upsetting when they directly insult our *personal values and morals*. This occurs because it is a lot harder to dismiss an offensive thought or image, especially when it originates from within you. Common questions are 'How could I have thought of such a thing?' or 'I didn't know I had this side to my personality'.

We usually find that thoughts that concern harming those that we care about most—a newborn baby, a partner, or a mother—are the most abhorrent. For example, the society we live in reserves its greatest condemnation for sexual predators, paedophiles, murderers, and psychopaths, so thoughts that relate to these areas will be particularly distressing.

Aggressive thoughts towards those who are considered frail or weak are also common and very distressing, such as an intrusive thought of pushing over an old lady in the supermarket or throwing a baby down the stairs. Even though we know that everyone experiences thoughts like these, people generally don't confess them to others, and keep them secret.

**COMMON INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS ANONYMOUSLY REPORTED
BY MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC****Harming**

- Thought of jumping in front of a car
- Thought of throwing a baby down the stairs
- Idea of taking a meat cleaver and threatening someone in the family
- Picturing a loved one dead

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- The thought that if I forget to say goodbye to someone, he or she might die
- Image of hitting a pedestrian with my car.

Contamination or disease

- Fear of harm to family through exposure to asbestos
- Thoughts of catching a disease through touching a toilet seat
- Idea that dirt is always on my hands
- Idea of contracting a disease through contact with a person
- Thought of contracting a serious disease from a public pool.

Inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour

- Impulse to say something nasty and damning to someone
- Hoping someone doesn't succeed
- Image of myself singing inappropriately at a friend's funeral
- Impulse to do something shameful or terrible
- Thought of unnatural sexual acts
- Image of a penis
- Thoughts of acts of violence in sex
- Idea of having sex with ugly people on the bus
- Idea of sex with a family member.

Doubts about safety and memory

- Thought that I haven't locked the house up properly
- Image that my house has burnt down and I've lost everything I own
- Idea that objects are not arranged perfectly
- Idea that I haven't put my handbrake on properly, so my car will roll into traffic.

In summary, it is very important for you to remember that the experience of upsetting and disturbing thoughts is completely normal, and experienced by everybody. However, nobody really talks about such thoughts. Intrusive thoughts only become a problem when we pay a lot of attention to them and give them some kind of meaning beyond just being random brain activity.