

**A7: Intrusive thoughts, part 2****CAN INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS CAUSE BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN?**

The answer is *no*. Experiencing an unwanted, intrusive thought such as 'I might become contaminated' can be very upsetting if you believe that every thought you have is important and has meaning. As we have covered already, intrusive thoughts are simply thoughts that most people experience from time to time. It is important not to attribute special significance or meaning to these thoughts.

Many people with OCD who become upset by the content of intrusive thoughts believe that having thoughts such as these increase the chances of the bad thing happening; for example, 'Now that I have had this thought, it means that it is more likely to come true in the future'. Believing that the occurrence of these thoughts will increase the chances of the bad thing happening is very distressing. In fact, it is so distressing that it can result in trying particularly hard to push the unpleasant thoughts away or trying to reassure yourself that nothing bad will happen. As you know, trying to push unpleasant thoughts away does not work, and simply makes them occur more frequently. The most important thing to do is to recognise that what is occurring is just a repetitive thought, and that it is not necessary to analyse the meaning of the thoughts in any way.

The idea that experiencing a thought can affect reality is one that you will need to question. For example, if it were true that the simple occurrence of a thought can cause that very thing to happen, then it should be possible for you have the thought of winning Lotto next weekend in order for it to happen. The problem with intrusive thoughts is that they upset us because the content is usually very offensive to us.

What would happen if you imagined as hard as you could something horrible happening to a good friend? Are your thoughts capable of changing your friend's life? If you are answering yes, then ask yourself how. How does this connection between thoughts in your head and events in the outside world occur? Imagine trying to convince a scientist that this is possible. What do you think the scientist would say?

The scientific response, based on what we know about cause and effect, is that for events to occur there needs to be some associated

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causal mechanism. For example, if a person suffers a car accident, there are often several causal factors involved, such as other drivers, road conditions, the driver's mental alertness, and the functioning of the car. However, other people's negative thoughts do not cause car accidents.

The likelihood of bad things happening is not increased by experiencing upsetting thoughts about bad things happening; for example, the likelihood of becoming contaminated by HIV is dependent on actual known risk factors, which can be easily delineated. Experiencing frequent intrusive thoughts that you may be contaminated by HIV does not mean that you are more likely to be contaminated. Again, you must ask yourself what the known causal factors are. Repetitive upsetting thoughts about having HIV have never been found to increase the chances of contracting it.

HAVING NEGATIVE INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS  
MUST MEAN I WANT THEM TO HAPPEN

Sometimes people with OCD mistakenly assume that because they keep having certain upsetting thoughts, such as 'I might stab my girlfriend', they must want this to happen at some level. They conclude that, because the thoughts keep occurring, it must mean that they want to have the thoughts. If you are having this belief, it is essential that you remind yourself of the following:

- The reason that intrusive thoughts become more frequent is that most people try to push them away, and doing this always increases the frequency. Remember the white bear exercise: the more you try not to have thoughts of a white bear, the stronger the thoughts become.
- Everyone experiences upsetting thoughts from time to time; the experience of a thought is not equivalent to wanting the content of the thought to happen.
- If you were happy about these thoughts and wanted them to come true, you would not be experiencing distress about the content and meaning.