

Managing Intrusive Thoughts

Intrusive thoughts are unwanted thoughts or vivid images that suddenly enter your mind. They tend to be disturbing to the person experiencing them and may trigger feelings like anxiety, shame, or disgust.

Almost everyone has intrusive thoughts from time to time. However, for those with depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or a history of trauma, they may be more frequent or intense.

Common themes of intrusive thoughts



Violence

thoughts about hurting someone, harming yourself, or other violent scenarios



Sexual thoughts

thoughts about a disturbing sexual impulse or an unwanted attraction



Morality / religion

thoughts about doing something “bad,” or offending God



Health

thoughts about developing a disease or becoming contaminated



Relationships

thoughts about the “rightness” of a relationship, ruining a relationship, or cheating



Perfectionism

self-critical thoughts or worries that a small mistake could have major consequences

Key insights

- **Thinking about something does not make it real or important.** A thought is not a fact, a reality, or a secret desire. Sometimes our brains come up with things that are irrelevant—that’s all.
- **Your thoughts do not define you.** Everyone has thoughts they keep private. We judge others by their actions, not their thoughts. Allow yourself the same kindness.
- **Having intrusive thoughts is normal.** In one study, over 90% of participants reported having disturbing intrusive thoughts over a 3-month period.

Managing Intrusive Thoughts

The key to coping with intrusive thoughts is to change your relationship with them. Instead of viewing intrusive thoughts as bad or meaningful, the goal is to see them as random, boring, and unimportant.

How to manage intrusive thoughts

1 Notice the intrusive thought

Watch for the following signs of an intrusive thought:

- The thought is very different from how you usually think.
- The thought is disturbing to you or goes against your values.
- The thought is difficult to control.

2 Label the intrusive thought

Instead of engaging with the thought, take a step back and say to yourself:

"I'm having an intrusive thought. It's meaningless and it'll eventually pass."

3 Accept the intrusive thought

Fighting an intrusive thought is like throwing gasoline on a fire. Instead of trying to change the thought, let it run its course. This doesn't mean you agree with the thought.

Tips:

- Continue doing whatever you were doing before the thought.
- Remember that it might take time for the thought to run its course, but it will eventually fade on its own.
- Notice how repetitive the thought is, which makes it boring after a while.
- Don't attach meaning to the thought. Instead, acknowledge it is just a normal brain glitch.