Intrusive thoughts: everyone has them

Strange, unwanted thoughts are normal, and almost everyone has them.

Many people have stood on a train platform and had a sudden thought of jumping, or held a baby and pictured dropping it, or had a shocking thought in a quiet church. Thoughts like these are normal.

What the research shows

When people with no mental health problem are asked, around nine in ten report unwanted, intrusive thoughts. The content is the same as in OCD: harming someone, doing something shocking, contamination, doubts, sexual and blasphemous thoughts.

What differs in OCD is what happens next.

Someone without OCD

- "That was a weird thought."
- Shrugs and moves on
- The thought fades
- It rarely comes back

Someone with OCD

- "Why would I think that? What does it say about me?"
- Tries to push it away, check or cancel it out
- The thought gets stronger
- It returns again and again

Why pushing a thought away does not work

Try this for one minute: do not think about a white bear. Most people find the bear pops up at once, and keeps popping up. The harder you try not to think something, the more your mind checks whether you are thinking it.

What a thought is not

- **A thought is not a wish.** The thoughts that upset you most are the ones furthest from what you want.
- **A thought is not an action.** Thinking something does not make it more likely to happen.
- **A thought is not a fact about you.** Minds produce all sorts of content. You are not responsible for what turns up, only for what you do.

Try this

When an intrusive thought arrives, label it ("There is an intrusive thought") and carry on with what you were doing. Do not argue, check or push. Let it sit in the background, like a radio in another room.

The survey research began with Stanley Rachman and Padmal de Silva (1978). The white bear experiment was carried out by Daniel Wegner (1987).

My notes and questions

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