

# Intrusive Thoughts

OCD · UNDERSTANDING UNWANTED THOUGHTS

*Why unwanted thoughts happen, and why having a thought doesn't mean you want it, believe it or will act on it*

Intrusive thoughts are sudden, unwanted thoughts, images or urges that pop into the mind, often about the very things we care about most. They can feel shocking or frightening. Understanding what they are, and what they are not, can make them easier to live with.



*A thought is a mental event. It is not a wish, a belief or a plan.*

## 01 Why unwanted thoughts happen

*You are far from alone*

### Almost everyone has them

In a study across six continents, about 94% of people reported at least one unwanted intrusive thought in the past three months (Radomsky et al., 2014).

### They often target what matters

Minds tend to latch onto thoughts that clash with our values. A thought can feel so upsetting precisely because it goes against who you are.

### Fighting them can backfire

Trying hard to push a thought away may, for some people, keep it coming back, though this effect varies (Abramowitz et al., 2001).

## 02 When thoughts feel like actions

*Thought-action fusion*

Sometimes a thought can feel as powerful or as meaningful as an action. Psychologists call this **thought-action fusion** (Shafran et al., 1996). It is a common thinking pattern, especially in OCD, and it usually shows up in two ways:

#### WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

*"If I think it, it's more likely to happen."*

**A gentler view:** thoughts don't have the power to make events happen. Thinking about an accident doesn't cause one.

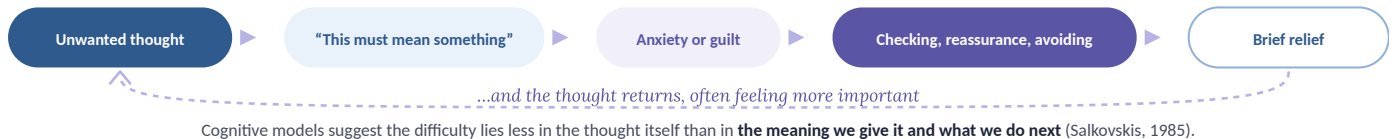
#### WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

*"Thinking it is as bad as doing it."*

**A gentler view:** thoughts arrive uninvited, so they aren't choices. What we do is what reflects our values.

## 03 What keeps the cycle going

*It's the response, not the thought*



Cognitive models suggest the difficulty lies less in the thought itself than in **the meaning we give it and what we do next** (Salkovskis, 1985).

## 04 My reflection

*Only write what feels okay; a few words is enough*

An unwanted thought that bothers me

What my mind tells me it means

Is thought-action fusion showing up?

☐ It could make it happen ☐ It's as bad as doing it ☐ Not sure

What I usually do next

☐ Check ☐ Seek reassurance ☐ Avoid ☐ Push it away  
☐ Undo it in my head

A kinder, more accurate way to see this thought

*Having this thought doesn't mean I want it, believe it or will act on it.*

### Help is available

If intrusive thoughts take up a lot of time, cause significant distress or lead to rituals, speak with your psychologist or GP. OCD is treatable, and cognitive behavioural therapy including exposure and response prevention is a recommended approach (NICE, 2005). This page is not a diagnosis.

#### SOURCES

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