



Intrusive Thoughts Are Normal: What to Do When Your Mind Says Something Scary

An explainer and "sticky thought" worksheet · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Almost everyone has unwanted, disturbing thoughts, even about harm, sex, or things they find shocking.
- Having a thought does not mean you want it, believe it, or will act on it.
- The more we fight intrusive thoughts, the stickier they become.

You are not alone

Intrusive thoughts are unwanted thoughts, images, or urges that pop into the mind. They can be violent, sexual, blasphemous, or simply bizarre. Examples include "What if I jumped?" at a train platform, an image of dropping a baby, or a sudden doubt about your relationship.

Research shows these thoughts are extremely common in the general population. What differs is how people respond to them.

Why some thoughts get "sticky"

Makes thoughts stickier	Helps thoughts pass
Believing a thought means something about you ("thought-action fusion")	Seeing thoughts as mental noise, not messages
Trying hard to push them away	Letting them come and go
Seeking reassurance or analyzing them	Not engaging, not solving
Avoiding triggers	Continuing with life as usual

Thought-action fusion is the belief that thinking something makes it more likely to happen, or is as bad as doing it. It's a common pattern in anxiety and OCD, and it can be gently unlearned.

What the research says

In an early study, most people without OCD reported intrusive thoughts similar in content to those of people with OCD (Rachman & de Silva, 1978).

An international study across 13 countries found that about 94% of participants had experienced at least one unwanted intrusive thought in the previous three months (Radomsky et al., 2014).

Trying to suppress a thought tends to make it come back more often, an effect known as the "white bear" effect (Wegner et al., 1987).

Tool: My Sticky Thought Worksheet

Question	My answer
The intrusive thought (as it shows up):	
What I fear it means about me:	
What it actually says about my values (what I care about):	
What I usually do in response (avoid, check, analyze):	
A new response I'll try ("There's that thought again"):	
Distress before (0–10) / after (0–10):	

Strategies to try

- **Label it.** "I'm having the thought that..." adds distance.
- **Don't argue.** Debating a thought keeps you engaged with it.
- **Return to the present.** Let the thought be there while you carry on with what you were doing.
- **Limit reassurance.** Seeking reassurance gives temporary relief but makes thoughts stickier.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Let the thought "hang out."** Instead of pushing a thought away, imagine it as a pop-up ad. You don't have to click it, and you don't have to close it either.

- **Try the "white bear" test.** For one minute, try NOT to think of a white bear. Notice what happens. This classic experiment shows why suppressing thoughts makes them stronger.
- **Write it, then read it slowly.** With support, some people write their intrusive thought on paper and read it aloud several times until it loses its shock. This is a form of exposure.
- **Sing the thought.** Repeat the thought to a silly tune, like "Happy Birthday." It reminds your brain that it's just words, not a warning. This is an ACT defusion technique.
- **Notice your values.** Intrusive thoughts often target what you care about most. A frightening thought about harming a baby, for example, usually shows up in loving parents. The distress itself points to your values.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What intrusive thought bothers me most? What do I fear it says about me?

What would I tell a friend who had the same thought?

What do my most upsetting thoughts reveal about what I care about?

How would my day look if I let this thought come and go?

When to reach out for support

If intrusive thoughts cause significant distress, take up a lot of time, or lead to rituals or avoidance, they may be part of OCD or anxiety. A therapist can help, and these concerns are very treatable. If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others that feel like intentions rather than unwanted intrusions, please seek help right away: call or text 9-8-8 or call 911.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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