

Intrusive Thoughts:

Sometimes I Get Crazy Thoughts That Distress Me

Case: Loving partners are preparing a meal together. One is using a cutting knife when a weird fleeting thought crossed their mind of, 'what if I stabbed my partner?' They became anxious about knives, Wondering, 'Am I safe to be with?', and started avoiding using knives.

Question: Sometimes weird, crazy unpleasant, distressing, threatening, violent and scary thoughts and urges come into my head out of the blue, about hurting someone I love, perhaps a baby or a partner, or jumping in front of a moving car or train, or steering into oncoming traffic, or doing a strange sexual act. Am I insane? Am I a bad person?

Response:

- Definitely not! These are just intrusive thoughts. Actually, everyone has intrusive thoughts – having “junk” thoughts are normal. Our brain generates hundreds of thousands of quite random thoughts every day.
- Sometimes these are triggered by something we see or hear, or perhaps in response to some strong feelings (like anger) or desires we have.
- Most of us are embarrassed to admit them, worrying others will badly judge them, so keep the intrusive thoughts a secret, which leaves us wrongly thinking we are the only ones.
- Most get intrusive thoughts, think nothing of them, get on with living, and the thoughts go.
- Others question why they have them, are in fear they might act on them, think that it means something bad about them, and they try to control the intrusive thoughts.
- An intrusive thought is just an unwelcome, unwanted thought or image, that pops into your mind. They don't mean anything. It is not true these thoughts mean you want to (or are capable) to action them. In fact, the opposite is likely true, as the source of the unwanted thought is often about the things we most value, that we hold dear, explaining why it alarms us so much and why we try so hard to get rid of it.
- AND, unfortunately, the effort we make to fight them off, ironically fuels them, and that's how they become a problem. The brain has sensed this as something that needs serious attention, and it invokes the automatic stress response (fight, flight, freeze) to protect you against danger even if the danger is not real. So, we give the intrusive thoughts attention (including adopting tactics to make sure you do no harm), and the thoughts stick around, just like in the Harvard research when people were told to not think of a white bear.... the white bear wouldn't go away!
- So, there is nothing wrong with you as a person for having these thoughts - there is a problem with what you do with the thoughts, how you respond to the thoughts.
- And, as we become anxious about the thoughts and make increasingly bigger efforts to remove or avoid the thoughts, this makes them stick, which if not addressed may lead to mental illness.
- So, if this is occurring, try to retrain your brain to.....
- accept your thoughts and learn new ways to react to them (eg try learning Mindfulness), such as carrying on what you are doing when an intrusive thought occurs. Don't engage with it. Don't waste time pushing the thought away. Don't examine it. Don't water it or it may grow.
- remember a thought is not an action. Like dreams, they are meaningless and just the brain's imagination at work - simply label them as “intrusive thoughts”.
- Do things differently, including stop taking actions you started to reduce risks related to the intrusive thoughts, but which keep them alive.
- Take the fear out of your thoughts – share them. A problem shared is a problem halved.
- Learn to tweak your stress response.
- Useful Resource: Relaxation & Mindfulness App: Smiling Mind (FREE)

The only difference between an intrusive thought that pops into your head and then leaves, and an intrusive thought that is distressing, is how you respond to it.