

5-Steps to Deal with Intrusive Thoughts

Objective: To learn how to handle intrusive and recurring thoughts by accepting them rather than fighting them.

You Should Know

Everyone has unacceptable intrusive thoughts at some time. Take a look at these examples:

- Josh walked down the corridor of his school and suddenly had the thought that he might pull the fire alarm.
- Samantha stood near the edge of the rooftop of her building and suddenly thought she might jump off.
- Nadia was very religious, but while she was sitting in church, she suddenly felt like she might shout out some obscene words.

Most of the time these are passing thoughts. Although they are totally unacceptable and completely out of character, they come and go very quickly and minutes later people forget all about them. In many ways, they are more of a curiosity than a problem.

But for some people, intrusive and unacceptable thoughts get “stuck” in their brains. For example, a common intrusive thought of people with anxiety disorders is that something will happen to a family member and they will be hurt or even killed. This happened to Maureen each time her 16-year-old took out the car. Maureen would spend the evening imagining gory scenes of automobile crashes. She tried to distract herself with TV shows, binge eating ice cream, and, on occasion, drinking too much wine. Her relief only came when her son came home. But this relief was only temporary. Every time her son took out the car, Maureen’s troubling thoughts seemed to get worse.

Researchers in the field of anxiety disorders tell us that Maureen’s way of coping with her unacceptable thoughts were exactly opposite to what would actually help her. They tell us that the more you try and get rid of intrusive thoughts, the more they are sure to come back.

Instead of trying to fight your intrusive thoughts, the recommendation is to accept them, and these five steps can help you do just that.

1. Label your intrusive thoughts as “just thoughts.” Remind yourself that they have no power over you.
2. Tell yourself that these thoughts are just your brain going on “automatic,” and you can safely ignore them.
3. Accept and allow the thoughts into your mind. Do not try to push them away.
4. Breathe from your diaphragm until your anxiety starts to go down.

5. Continue whatever you were doing prior to the intrusive thought.

Try It

This may seem strange, but the next thing you need to do is to *practice* having upsetting thoughts. Forcing yourself to have the upsetting thoughts you have been avoiding is the only way you can learn to accept them with the Five-Step Acceptance procedure described above. When you learn to accept your upsetting intrusive thoughts rather than fighting them, they will soon stop being a big part of your life.

Here is what to do.

Write down the situations that regularly trigger your intrusive thoughts. Write down the most common thoughts that you have. Then rate the distress you experience while having these thoughts from 1 = they really don't bother me to 10 = I can't stand them anymore. Then practice the 5-Step Acceptance Procedure. It will normally take 15 to 20 minutes. Finally rate your distress again, from 1 to 10.

Do this every day for at least two weeks and see if your intrusive thoughts are still playing a big part in your life.

Trigger Situations	Common Intrusive Thoughts	Level of Distress	5-Step Procedure (Y/N)	Level of Distress

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 1- = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
