

How You Can Overcome Intrusive Thoughts



“Meditation, mindfulness and other tools can help us avoid unwanted thoughts,” says social psychologist Daniel Wegner in this month’s edition of *Monitor on Psychology*.

Have you ever wanted to avoid thinking about a particular experience or topic only to find that it continually intrudes into your thoughts and activities? And the more you try to suppress the thought the more intrusive it becomes? Wegner, a Harvard University Professor, terms these thoughts “white bears” and after encountering these thoughts 25 years ago, delved into research on thought suppression.

Through research over the course of a decade he found that when we try not to think of something part of the brain avoids the thought, but another part “checks in” to make sure the thought is not coming up. Ironically, this “checking in” to make sure the thought is not coming up, brings it to mind.

So what do you do, when your mind inevitably “checks in” with those thoughts you most want to keep out of your consciousness? In a presentation for the American Psychological Association, Wegner described several strategies to suppress thoughts that intrude even when you are trying not to think them.

The techniques he described include:

- *Pick an absorbing distraction and focus on that, instead.* Try to find an engrossing activity to divert your attention, for example puzzles, emotional movies, an engrossing conversation or a favorite hobby.
- *Try to postpone the thought.* According to Wegner, some research suggests that setting aside a half an hour to worry at a particular time during the day can decrease worry and intrusive thoughts the rest of the day.
- *Cut back on multi-tasking.* In another study, people under increased mental load (say from trying to complete multiple tasks at once) show an increase in thoughts of death, which are a common intrusive and unwanted thought for many.
- *Expose yourself to the thought.* Allowing yourself to think about unwanted topics in controlled ways can decrease the likelihood that they will pop up and intrude into your thoughts at unwanted times.
- *Meditation and mindfulness.* In mindfulness exercises you practice focusing attention, noticing distractions, such as intrusive thoughts, and refocusing. Like with a sport, practice improves your skill level. Over time you can train your mind to notice distracting thoughts and quickly refocus.

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