

Intrusive Thoughts

Intrusive and unwanted thoughts and images can be very distressing. They are often about things which we value the most, which makes them even more disturbing for us.

Everybody has intrusive thoughts, but they cause more distress for some of us.

Why can't I just stop these thoughts?

Unfortunately it's not that simple. To help explain why, I invite you to try an activity called "The Red Bus Exercise".

The Red Bus Exercise

Set a timer for 3 minutes and during that time, try hard NOT to think about a red bus. Any time you accidentally think about a red bus, mark it off on the tally chart below.

The more we try NOT to think about something, the more that thought tends to enter our minds. This is known as the "ironic rebound effect" (Wegner et al. 1987). It helps us to understand why we "can't just stop" intrusive thoughts, however much we want to.

What happens when the intrusive thought enters my mind?

There is a small almond-shaped structure in our brain called the amygdala. The amygdala's job is to detect danger.



When the amygdala senses danger, it releases hormones into the body to help protect you from the threat. This is sometimes called the

'fight, flight or freeze' response.

This may be helpful if, for example, the threat was a bear.

The hormones prepare our bodies to:

fight off the bear



run away from the bear



or **freeze** (so the bear moves on without noticing us)




However, the amygdala sometimes falsely detects danger when there is no actual threat.




Intrusive thoughts can trigger the
'fight, flight or freeze' response.




Instead of helping us like they would if there was a bear, 

these hormones just make us feel heightened and anxious.



For example, we may feel our heart beating faster 

and our muscles may tense up. 

It can be helpful to consider how you feel the 'fight, flight, freeze' response in your body.

Our bodies are prepared for
fight, flight or freeze,
but as none of those responses are appropriate
we are left feeling anxious, heightened and distressed.

Compulsions

We will naturally want to reduce that feeling of anxiety which quickly follows an intrusive thought. Sometimes this leads us to develop compulsions or compulsive behaviours. If we find ourselves needing to do something regularly and repetitively in order to cope with the anxiety, we may be developing compulsions. Whilst they might temporarily ease our discomfort, compulsions can become problematic and indeed reinforce the intrusive thoughts.



*So...
if I can't stop the thoughts,
can't avoid the
'fight, flight, freeze' response,
and want to avoid compulsions,
what can I do?*

We can learn to have more control over how we respond to the intrusive thoughts and resulting anxiety.

This isn't easy and it is important to be kind to yourself as you learn how to do this.

So, we start by considering our wellbeing.

Increasing wellbeing can help reduce intrusive thoughts and the distress they cause.

How can we increase wellbeing? It varies for each of us but it may include:

- addressing and **reducing the levels of anxiety** in your life
- doing **more of the things which bring you joy**
- doing **more of the things which help you to stay regulated**

or whatever else you find increases your general sense of wellbeing and contentment.



How can I develop more control over how I respond to the intrusive thoughts?



Don't try to push the intrusive thought away

Trying not to think about something usually makes us think about it even more.

Instead, the aim is to reduce the distress which the thought causes us; to reduce the 'fight, flight, freeze' response which the thought triggers.

If you are wondering how this is possible, imagine this...

You watch the same scary film 50 times.

Each time you watch it, you:

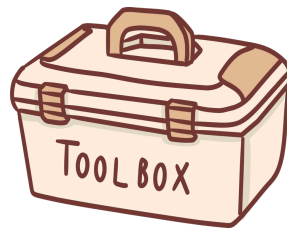
Remind yourself that the film is not true; it is not actually happening

Use various techniques to reassure your brain and body that you are safe and the fight, flight, freeze response is not necessary

Are with other people who are not scared of the film

By the 50th time, you will probably find it less scary.

We will apply similar ideas to our intrusive thoughts.



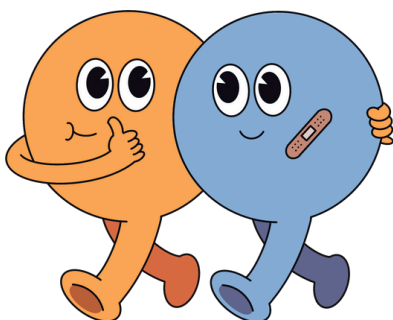
Develop your tool box

There are various suggestions or 'tools' which you may find helpful as you develop more control over your response to these intrusive thoughts. Choose the ones which are most useful for you, and add them to your 'tool box'.

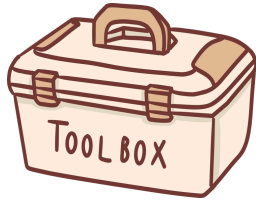
An imaginary friend

It can be hard to remember what is in your 'tool box' when the thoughts come.

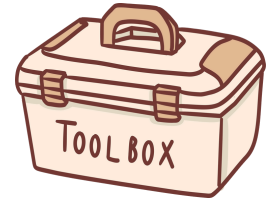
It can help to create 'an imaginary friend'. They can look and sound however you want them to (use your imagination!) but they are **ALWAYS kind and encouraging.**



When a thought pops into your mind, try asking your imaginary friend to remind you of your tools and help you to use them.



Build Your Tool Box



'Grounding' using the 5,4,3,2,1 technique

This technique helps by focussing your attention and senses to the here-and-now

Name 5 things you can see



Name 4 things you can hear



Name 3 things you can feel



Name 2 things you can smell



Name 1 thing you can taste



Breathwork

Taking slow deep breaths reduces your heartrate to calm your body



Blow up a balloon

or

Blow some bubbles



Reminders

When you're in **'fight, flight, freeze'** it is hard to think clearly.

This is because it becomes difficult to access the parts of your brain which are responsible for rational and logical thinking.

It can therefore be **helpful to have some pre-prepared reminders** to tell yourself.

*You may want to have them written down,
or could imagine your imaginary friend saying them to you.*

Here are some examples (but you may want to create your own)

"it is just an intrusive thought"

"Thinking the thought will not make it happen"

"Thinking the thought does not mean that I want it to happen"

"This thought is temporary and will pass"

"I am safe, it is just my brain being overprotective"

"This is a false alarm. My brain sensed danger but it is just a thought. I am safe."



Talk Back



Show the thoughts you don't take them seriously.
If you can manage it, you could even try some humour.



Again, you may want to have some ideas written down, or could imagine your imaginary friend saying them to you.

Here are some examples (but you may want to create your own)

"yeah, whatever"

"What a load of rubbish"

"That's ridiculous"

"sounds like a bad film plot"

"This is just getting boring now, I've heard it all before"

Humming or Chanting 'Om'

Strange as it may seem, there is a reason why this can help!

The **vibrations** from humming or chanting 'om' **stimulate** a very important nerve in your body, called the **vagus nerve**.

This **relaxes you** and reduces the **fight, flight, freeze** response.



Movement

Think of an animal in the **fight, flight, freeze** response.

Even if their first reaction to the danger is to 'freeze', when they are able to run or move they will probably do so.

If your body is prepared for **fight, flight** or **freeze**, you may find it helpful to move.

Remember, your amygdala has released hormones into your body (like adrenaline) to prepare you to run fast or fight.

You could walk around the room, rock backwards and forwards, or try something more energetic like star jumps or running on the spot as the adrenaline levels decrease.



Hug and tap

Sometimes called the 'Butterfly Hug', this gentle touch and tapping can help to calm you and reduce the **fight, flight, freeze** response.

Cross your arms to give yourself a hug.

Take deep breaths in and out.

Gently tap your hands on your chest (or shoulders if you prefer) left then right and so on.



Practice

If you have found any of these 'tools' helpful, the next step is to practice them.

It can be useful to

practice them when you are feeling calm

so it is easier to remember and use them when you have an intrusive thought.

Then keep practicing them when the thoughts come.

As you do this...**be kind, patient and encouraging to yourself.**

Over time, the intrusive thoughts should become less distressing.



Will the intrusive thoughts stop?



They may still pop into your head sometimes... but when they are less distressing you can respond to them differently.

Humans have thousands of thoughts every day. We give very little attention to most of them and just let them pass on by.

It can help to imagine your thoughts as clouds in a clear blue sky.

The clouds come...and they will go.

Some will be **BIGGER**, some *smaller*,

Some **white and fluffy**, some **grey and horrible**.

You cannot *push them away*...but **they will all pass**.

As a thought enters your mind, like a cloud entering the blue sky, try just noticing it, and waiting for it to pass...**because it will pass**.



Important Notes:

The approach described is largely based on a type of CBT called Exposure Response Prevention (ERP). This is known as the 'Gold Standard' therapy for OCD.

The practice of 'sitting with the discomfort' of the unpleasant intrusive thought has been shown to be very effective in reducing the distress caused by the thought and reducing the compulsions which can follow the thought.

However, the young person must be in control of the practice. It is their choice as to when/if they are ready/able to sit with the discomfort and indeed how much discomfort they can tolerate.

It is also important to remember that 'discomfort' is NOT the same as 'distress'.

We should not be asking young people to 'sit with' (or indeed 'lean into', as is sometimes suggested) intense distress.

Standard CBT (including ERP) should be adapted for neurodivergent young people.

I have aimed to make appropriate adaptations but if you feel it needs to be modified further to meet the needs of the young person, please do so.

Young people experiencing intrusive thoughts may also have broader anxiety issues or may have experienced trauma. If this is the case, it is likely that they would benefit from broader therapeutic support rather than focusing exclusively on the intrusive thoughts.

Whilst I hope this resource is helpful, it does not replace professional support. Please do seek professional advice if needed.