

## ***Are You Troubled by Negative Intrusive Thoughts? How we deal with distressing mental intruders will determine their hold on us.***

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Most of us like to feel in control, especially when it comes to our mind. Have you ever had a strange, unwanted thought suddenly pop in your head, one that seems to come from nowhere? Did you try to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away?

Maybe it happened during a conversation with a friend. The intrusive thought had nothing to do with the conversation, but it was so strange or disturbing that you lost track of the conversation. Or you're doing something important like taking an exam, meeting with your manager, or having a serious conversation with your intimate partner. Suddenly you catch yourself daydreaming, following a train of thought that has nothing to do with the task at hand. Quickly you pull yourself back on track and hope your distraction wasn't noticed.

All these examples involve a temporary loss of mental control. It happens to all of us many times throughout the day. We all do a lot of unintended, spontaneous thinking when alone, when interacting with other people, when trying to do some important task, and yes, when trying to write a blog.

Most often these mental intrusions are only slightly annoying. We quickly shift our attention back to the task at hand. In fact, mind wandering, daydreaming, and pleasant intrusive thoughts can be enjoyable. They can feel like a refreshing break from the mental toil of daily living.

But there is also a dark side to spontaneous thought: Intrusive thoughts can turn ugly. An intrusive thought might deal with some disturbing, disgusting, or offensive content. We might have unwanted thoughts that are contrary to our moral values or threaten our self-identity. When these "ugly" intrusive thoughts pop into our mind, they can take over, causing great personal distress. In fact, some mental health problems, like anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, excessive guilt, and even depression can be triggered by negative intrusive thoughts.

### **Spontaneous Thought Is the Brain's Default Mode**

To understand negative intrusions, we need to start with the brain. Neuroscientists posit that over 50 percent of our thinking is spontaneous, stimulus-independent thought—mind wandering, daydreaming, intrusive thoughts, and the like.<sup>1</sup> The brain regions responsible for spontaneous thought, called the brain's *default mode network*, are well-known from neuro-imaging studies.

We can't stop ourselves having spontaneous thoughts. We can't direct our brain to think only about things we want to think about. As I write this blog post, I am trying to concentrate on the topic at hand—unwanted intrusive thoughts. But as hard as I try, I'm also having unwanted spontaneous thoughts that are distracting me, like "I think I need a snack," "I feel worn-out," or "it's a beautiful sunny day, why not stop work and putter outside." The fact is, our brain is always generating spontaneous thoughts. That's just how it works!

But there's more. Spontaneous thinking is useful and helps us adapt to our environment. Spontaneous thoughts are important to creativity and problem-solving. Think back to some time when you were focusing on an important problem concerning work, school, or a relationship and a good idea suddenly popped into your mind. This moment of inspiration then led to a solution to your problem. Spontaneous thinking has also been linked to positive mental health, or what has been called flourishing. And it is likely that some people have a much higher rate of spontaneous thinking than others. So if you have a wild and imaginative mind, consider it a gift that can be put to good use.

### **Negative Intrusive Thoughts: Facing the Darker Side**

Not all spontaneous thinking will be positive, helpful, or simply mundane. At times our intrusive thoughts can be very negative, disturbing, bizarre, or unsettling. If you have an imaginative mind with a lot of spontaneous thought, it's possible you'll experience more of these dark intrusions.

Certain types of unwanted intrusions are especially distressing: thoughts about causing harm to yourself or others; doing something morally repugnant; committing an offense or some other wrongdoing; or recalling a past mistake or embarrassment, an experience of shame or humiliation, a threat to your personal safety or security, a personal loss or trauma, and the list could go on. Practically any negative experience or imagined threat could become a negative intrusive thought.

Many things influence intrusive thinking. You are more likely to have negative mental intrusions if you are :

- under a lot of stress,
- feeling depressed, anxious, angry, or [guilty](#),
- an emotional person with fluctuations in how you feel,
- prone to overthinking,
- facing significant losses or threats in your life,
- someone who has experienced trauma,
- tired or sleep deprived.

### **What to Do About Negative Intrusions**

If you've been experiencing distressing mental intrusions over many months or years, you might want to consider taking a different approach to the problem. Over the past few years, psychologists have learned a lot about unwanted intrusive thoughts and their treatment. In the next several blog posts, we'll consider some strategies that can reduce the pain of negative intrusive thinking and improve mental control.

In the meantime, consider two steps that are important in developing a different attitude toward negative intrusions.

1. Accept that intrusive thinking, whether positive or negative, is a normal and natural way of thinking. You cannot stop yourself having intrusive thoughts. It's how our brains work.
2. If you have frequent and persistent distressing intrusive thoughts, consider whether any of the factors listed above are responsible for their surge. If some of these factors are relevant, you can make the necessary lifestyle changes and/or seek professional help. Improvement in your emotional state can make a big difference in reducing unwanted negative intrusive thoughts.

We all value self-control, but when our mind is haunted by unwanted intrusions, it can leave us shaken and full of self-doubt. Learning a better way to deal with your runaway mind is an important part of recovery from emotional distress.

### **References**

- 1 Christoff, K. 2012. "Undirected Thought: Neural Determinants and Correlates". *Brain Research* 1428: 51-59.