

Clinical Bad Thoughts

The following is adapted from 'The Imp of the Mind: Exploring the Silent Epidemic of Obsessive Bad Thoughts' by Lee Baer

Fortunately, for most people, these occasional bad thoughts are nothing but a fleeting annoyance. But many people who come to see me are not so fortunate. Their bad thoughts may be about violence or sex or blasphemy and may bombard them every waking hour. These bad thoughts—when severe they are called obsessions—may cost people the most important things in their lives: Some cannot bear to be around their own children; others cannot have relationships; and others are so paralyzed they cannot perform simple everyday activities—such as leaving their house—because of their bad thoughts. Many contemplate suicide at some time. These are obsessions of clinical severity and require treatment.

Just about two years ago I began conducting a group at McLean Hospital for men and women who suffer from clinical bad thoughts. Since that time, I have spoken to dozens of patients suffering from these thoughts who've never before admitted them to anyone, but were relieved to find that many other individuals suffer from similar thoughts. The degree to which these bad thoughts have devastated the quality of life of these people has amazed me. Virtually all the people who've come to my group for severe violent or sexual obsessions have thought about suicide, some have even tried suicide, and all have had their social lives disrupted. Some cannot date because of these thoughts; others have been divorced because of the thoughts. Many avoid being around children; most will turn away from television shows, movies, books, magazines, and newspaper accounts of violent or sexual activities, lest they find their own bad thoughts triggered.

Apparently, the Imp of the Perverse visits every one of us from time to time, with two possible outcomes: (1) We give the thoughts little attention and no credence and go on with our lives, or (2) we are strongly affected by the bad thoughts, so that the thoughts occur frequently during the day and interfere with our functioning socially or at work.'

An example of the latter outcome was Isaac, a patient of mine in his mid-twenties who had always loved animals. Yet by the time I met him he cringed every time he passed a dog or cat on the street. Just a glance at the wagging tail was enough to start the bad thoughts—he felt compelled to stare at the dog's anus and his thoughts would start. They were always the same, thoughts of intercourse with the dog, followed by the worry that this meant he was really a pervert. He was often convinced it was true: "Why in the world," he asked himself, "should looking at a dog or a cat on the streets lead me to stare at their private parts or trigger these thoughts about having sex with them—unless that is what I really want?"

After Isaac had told me his story at our first meeting, I told him that if he was to tame his bad thoughts, the first key fact that he had to understand, and believe, was:

You are not so abnormal as you think. Every human, being is visited from time to time by the Imp of the Per verse, who makes you think the most inappropriate thoughts at the most inappropriate times.