

How intrusive thoughts become obsessions

Let's start with the premise that all human beings experience intrusive thoughts, doubts, images, bodily sensations and impulses or urges which may be absurd or run counter to what they want to do or think ('thoughts' for short).

In experiments done in the 1970s, researchers asked people with OCD and people without OCD to list the thoughts that popped into their head. Researchers could find no difference in the type of thoughts reported by OCD sufferers:

1. ***Impulse to hurt or harm someone.***
2. ***Impulse to say something nasty and damning to someone.***
3. ***Thought of causing harm to, or the death of, close friend or family member.***
4. *Thought of acts of violence in sex.*
5. *Impulse to crash car, when driving.*
6. ***Thought 'Why should they do that? They shouldn't do that,' in relation to people 'misbehaving'.***
7. *Impulse to attack or strangle cats or kittens.*
8. *Thought 'I wish he/she were dead,' with reference to persons close and dear.*
9. *Thought of harming partner with physical violence.*
10. ***Impulse to attack or violently punish someone, for example, to throw a child out of a bus.***
11. ***Impulse to engage in certain sexual practices that involve pain to the partner.***
12. *Thought 'Did I commit this crime?', when reading reports of crime.*
13. *Thought that one might go berserk all of a sudden.*
14. ***Thought: wishing and imagining that someone close to you was hurt or harmed.***
15. ***Impulse to violently attack and kill a dog that one loved.***
16. *Thought 'These boys when they were young' — a mechanically repeated phrase.*
17. *Impulse to attack or harm someone, especially own child, with bat, knife, or heavy object.*
18. ***Thought of unnatural sexual acts.***
19. ***Thought of hurting someone by doing something nasty, not physical violence, 'Would I or would I not do it?'***
20. ***Impulse to be rude and say something nasty to people.***

21. *Thought* of putting obscene words in print.

22. *Mental image* of stabbing a passer-by.

23. *Mental image* of stripping in church.

For the record, the items in **bold** are intrusive thoughts provided by people without OCD and the remainder are taken from people with OCD. *All humans, therefore, have intrusive thoughts, images, and urges that are absurd.* As a human being, you should be having such thoughts. If you didn't have absurd thoughts, you'd be a reptile. Reptiles have a poorly developed 'new brain' in the frontal lobes and are very unlikely to experience such thoughts! It's part of being human to have senseless intrusive thoughts. You need such thoughts and urges in order to problem solve. Those with OCD have more frequent and complex thoughts compared to those without and are more distressed by them **because of the importance and meaning they attach to the thoughts and the way that they have responded to them.** This is what makes such thoughts more frequent and distressing for sufferers. Those without OCD do not assign such importance to the thoughts or do not associate them with difficult experiences in the past so they don't try to get rid of them.

Your obsessional fears are often linked to your values or what you find important in life. Hence if you are a parent who has a thought about smothering your baby, it's because she is so precious, and you care for her deeply. Similar thoughts can affect childless people for whom children are important in some other way. For example, they might want to work with children or have their own family. Such intrusive thoughts often represent their deepest fears of being responsible for harming a defenceless child or having their liberty taken away because of unacceptable behaviour. Professionals refer to obsessional thoughts as 'ego-dystonic' — meaning that they are not in keeping with your values.

Similarly, a man who has intrusive images of masturbating over his mother is revealing his deepest fears and disgust. His mother is dying from cancer and he wants to avoid being in her company because of his fears. Yet, he also loves his mother enormously and it's very important to him that he cares for her when she is dying. The content of his obsessions represents his worries — he would not have these thoughts unless he valued being a good son to his mother. Sometimes it is difficult to work out how the content of your obsessions relates to what is important in 'our life.

Don't worry if you can't work out how your obsessions are related to your values — sometimes it is very hard to articulate the meaning. Some obsessions (especially those to do with order or feeling 'just right') are not commonly related to your values or identity. Some obsessions may have associations with past experiences especially of being abused, humiliated or betrayed.

Adpated from: *Overcoming Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 2nd Edition: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* by David Veale and Rob Willson (2021)