

## **When Bad Thoughts Are Dangerous**

Below are situations in which you should be concerned about your bad thoughts and seek professional treatment as soon as possible. Thankfully such circumstances are present in only a small minority of people suffering from bad thoughts.

### **If you do not feel upset by the thoughts but instead find them pleasurable.**

Earlier I described a man who watched presidential speeches and papal audiences while planning where to stand to get a good shot at the speaker. He described these thoughts to me as mildly enjoyable and did not describe any guilt or disgust at having these thoughts. If, like him, you do not feel guilt or distress due to your bad thoughts, you should talk to a mental health professional about your thoughts to make sure that you won't one day act on them.

### **If you have ever acted on violent or sexual thoughts or urges in the past—either while sober or under the influence of alcohol or drugs.**

I have seen several patients who, under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, acted violently or sexually in ways that got them into trouble with the law. When these individuals suffer with bad thoughts, it is extremely important that they get treatment to help them abstain from these substances that put them at high risk of acting on their thoughts and impulses. Remember that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. So, if you look back on your life and see that you have acted in violent or sexually inappropriate ways toward animals or people, then you should take your bad thoughts seriously. It may be that you're not able to properly inhibit your urges as most people can (this is called an impulse control disorder), and you need treatment to learn how to do this.

### **If you hear voices, think people are against you, or see things that others do not see.**

As you will see in the example of the new mother suffering from postpartum psychosis (see below), hallucinations can be dangerous because they do not permit you to perceive reality accurately. If this is happening to you, please contact a mental health professional as soon as possible, because new medications are available that can rapidly treat these problems with only mild side effects.

### **If you feel uncontrollable anger and find it hard to resist urges to act on your aggressive impulses.**

The students who fired on their classmates at Columbine High School were examples of this problem. If you feel extreme anger toward a particular person or group of people, please talk to a mental health professional—effective anger-management treatments exist to help you.

## Who Harms Babies

Are there any predictors of which women will actually harm their children? In fact, there are. A small percentage of women who suffer from postpartum depression develop a much more serious disorder called postpartum psychosis. Although I do not know any details about the case above of the woman charged with killing her baby in a microwave oven, my guess would be that she was suffering from a postpartum psychosis. Women suffering from postpartum psychosis lose touch with reality. As an example, one new mother "saw" yellow smoke coming from her infant's nostrils and ears and interpreted this as a sign that he was from the devil. She resolved that the only way to foil Satan was to leave her son in a trash can to die. Luckily her husband returned from work early, heard crying from the trash can, and saved the boy's life. The mother was then hospitalized, and her postpartum psychosis was successfully treated with medications and she returned to normal.

I end by emphasizing once again that the vast majority of people with bad thoughts will never act on their thoughts.

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