

Appendix

Intrusive Thoughts

It was my last therapy session with Abigail. She had originally come to see me because she had found this book helpful and felt that personal sessions would also benefit her. She had made excellent progress in identifying the stresses behind her original panic attacks, and she had been completely free of panic attacks for about six weeks. We shook hands, and as she was about to leave, I mentioned that Lion Publishing wanted to produce a new version of the book, and that I was working on a new chapter on emotional processing and panic. 'You must write a chapter on intrusive thoughts,' she immediately responded. 'You mention it in your book, but it is so important, it needs more.'

Abigail had been fearful of panic attacks, and she had experienced intrusive thoughts about harming others. Both had troubled her greatly; fortunately she was now free of both. Over the next week, I thought about Abigail's impassioned plea. There was no hesitation in her advice; it was obviously something she had needed very much that had been missing from the book. She might be right, I reckoned. Both panic attacks and intrusive thoughts are based on fear and cause much suffering, and it is sometimes hard to separate one from the other. So I set about planning and writing this appendix.

'Sod's Law'

The definition of 'Sod's Law' is that if you are about to eat a delicious slice of bread and jam and accidentally drop it, it will always land jam side down. With one exception: if you are trying to demonstrate Sod's Law to someone else, it always lands jam side up. If you have got Sod's Law firmly fixed in your mind, you already understand quite a lot about unwanted intrusive thoughts. Many people with panic attacks do not suffer from intrusive thoughts, so it is not necessary for them to read about them, but if you feel you need to, please just carry on.

Though you hate this song, you'll be humming it for weeks

Nearly everyone is familiar with finding themselves singing the song that annoys them most. Spitting Image's number 1 from 1986, 'The Chicken Song', included the line: 'Though you hate this song, you'll be humming it for weeks.' They were right: we were singing it for weeks! Frightening images on television or distressing life events have a tendency of popping back to mind at the most unwanted times. Intrusive thoughts are simply an exaggeration of these normal 'Sod's Law' experiences, and they may occur more when the person is under stress, tired or run-down. They become a problem when individuals become afraid of them. For instance, a woman may be cutting food with a knife and suddenly have a thought that she might stab her child with it. She loves her child, and it would be the last thing on earth she would wish to do, but she is afraid she might act on the thought. Whenever she picks up a knife in the future, the thought or impulse that she might stab the child recurs, and eventually fear stops her from picking up knives when the child is around. If she realized it was just a silly thought and ignored it, it could not develop into a disabling fear.

Intrusive thoughts are often set in the future: things I might do, thoughts I might act on. Another form of intrusive thought is based on the past: did I do something? A very normal thought is, 'Did I switch out the light/switch off the gas/lock the front door?' and it is common to double-check – once. When the thought – the doubt – keeps recurring, even after checking three or four times, it is beginning to intrude into the person's life. A more extreme version of this was a patient who had to keep concentrating 100 per cent when driving. If his mind wandered for a few seconds, he would have to turn the car around and retrace his journey, checking in case he had knocked someone over in the time he had not been concentrating on the road. Most people realize these thoughts are silly, unreasonable and not true, but they feel impelled to check 'just in case' it happened.

Intrusive thoughts can take the following forms:

- Thoughts about actions you might take in the future.
- Thoughts about what you might have done in the past, or something really awful you might have forgotten to do.

- Fears about you as a person: 'I'm becoming schizophrenic'; 'My memory is going'; 'I'm losing control.' The person often tries to prove the thoughts are not true by, for instance, constantly doing mental arithmetic or reasoning with themselves until they are reassured that they are normal.
- Constant awareness of bodily sensations, or about your own thinking processes, with sometimes quite complex ideas, such as, 'If I can't keep control of every thought, I'll lose control and descend into madness.'
- Having to count, or to repeat phrases or words continually.
- Nasty thoughts or words running through your mind against your will.

The thing that intrudes may come in the form of words, phrases, general ideas, intrusive feelings or unpleasant images.

Where your treasure is...

All these complex ideas and feelings can be traced to a sort of 'Sod's Law' principle. The intrusive thought attacks whatever is most precious or important to a person.

Table 4 (below) contains some illustrations of what is most precious to some people, and what the intrusive thought will be about.

Because these thoughts hit at the most precious things in a person's life, they are disturbing. If the person starts believing in them, believing that they will carry out the thought, then every intrusive thought comes with a most awful feeling of fear.

Table 4: Intrusive thoughts about the most precious thing in your life

MOST PRECIOUS THING IN YOUR LIFE	INTRUSIVE THOUGHT
Your baby	Harming baby
Your life	Jumping off a building/in front of a car
God/your salvation	Blasphemous thoughts/committing the unforgivable sin
Your mental health	Losing control of your mind
Your partner	Harming or killing them
Your career	Saying or doing something that will scupper your promotion
Your social standing	Saying something ridiculous so that others will look down on you

Just for the record at this point, these are *thoughts*. Thoughts are entirely different from actions. Just because the thought cannot be controlled, it does not mean that the action cannot be controlled. Actions can always be controlled. Having the thought does not mean doing the deed. Thoughts are independent of actions. It is all absolutely safe.

Intrusive thoughts can latch onto panic by the Sod's Law principle and make the whole experience worse. The commonest Sod's Law idea is, 'If I think about panic attacks, it will cause one to happen!' The last thing in the world the person wants is a panic attack, and the last thought in the world they want is about panic attacks. So which thought keeps coming back? Yes, you've guessed it: 'I'm going to have a panic attack.'

The strange thing is that the more people try to suppress the thoughts they are afraid of, the more they keep popping up. That is why it affects the things most precious to the person. A person may not be particularly concerned about their career, so intrusive thoughts about spitting in the boss's face would not be given too much attention, and they would not spend too much time suppressing them. If, however, the thoughts were about harming someone they loved, then a lot of effort would be spent in suppressing them. By trying to suppress the thoughts, the person is subconsciously giving a lot of attention to them. They are occupying a lot of mental space. Research by D.M. Wegner³⁰ demonstrated that the effort to keep unpleasant thoughts at bay has a sort of rebound effect: it makes them happen more. He called it an 'ironic process'.

Pink aeroplanes

When seeing patients with intrusive thoughts, I often do the 'pink-aeroplane experiment' to show them how suppressing thoughts has the very reverse effect from the intended one. I start with an idea they have probably never thought about before: pink aeroplanes. After mentioning pink aeroplanes to them, I say, 'We are going to do a little experiment in which I want you to try *not* to think about pink aeroplanes. Think about anything else, but not pink aeroplanes. We'll sit in silence for about two minutes.' I ask them to raise a finger if they do think about pink aeroplanes. Most people last about ten seconds before raising their finger. After about thirty seconds of struggling *not* to think about pink aeroplanes, the finger pops up

time after time, until they give up the task altogether. Very occasionally, I am surprised by someone who actually manages to keep the thought out of their head. But most people don't.

The purpose of this experiment is to show people how useless it is to try *not* to think about something. The big difference is that people are not afraid of pink aeroplanes, and they are only trying not to think about them because I have asked them to do an experiment. If the person is really afraid of some thought, they are setting up their own pink-airplane experiment. The fear of having the thought motivates them to try to stop the thought – which, as we have seen, simply makes it worse. What a strain to keep fighting back thoughts like this. The more they struggle, the worse it gets.

Is there a remedy for thoughts?

There are two different remedies, depending on the thinking processes of the sufferer.

1. THE UNWANTED GUEST

If the person is afraid of having thoughts – let's say, of harming themselves or harming others – and is spending time and energy trying to suppress or stop the thoughts, the remedy is to face the thing they fear. Running does not work. Facing fear does. Often in therapy, I set up one of these 'exposure' sessions. For up to forty minutes, the person is asked to *make* the thought happen, to keep thinking it, or to keep saying it. For instance, the person will say every ten seconds, 'I'm going to punch him.' Every minute, the patient gives me a score between 1 and 10 to indicate how anxious they feel, and I plot how their fear changes over the course of the session. Bit by bit, the fear gets lower and lower, and often disappears altogether. Facing the fear causes it to wither. They are asked to repeat this thirty to forty-minute exercise on about two occasions by themselves. If they are not so much afraid of *having* the thought as of what they will do when they get the thought, I may set up an experiment that allows them to discover they do not *act* on the thoughts. There is more about such 'personal experiments' in Chapter 16.

2. THINKING OURSELVES OUT OF TROUBLE

With some thoughts, such as doubts about things they have done or failed to do, or doubts about their mind, the person may spend hours

and hours trying to think themselves out of a hole, to reassure themselves it is OK, to undo the past (sometimes called an 'undoing ritual'), in order to reach a point of satisfaction or a feeling that things are right again. In this case, the intrusive thought arrives, for instance, 'I'm losing my mind,' which agitates and upsets the person so much that they try to reassure themselves that their mind is OK – a sort of mental QED. The trouble is that this can take hours, and the same cycle of thought can be repeated time and time again. Well-worn thinking grooves can be brooded over day after day. The state of agitation and the hoped-for feeling of reassurance or relaxation drive the person on and on to think things through.

Sometimes, they can reach a sort of reassurance, a sort of haven or oasis for a time, but then the same doubt comes back to mind, and they are off again. Usually, their thinking gets bogged down somewhere in the middle before they reach the satisfying feeling of a final proof. If this is the pattern, then the remedy is to stop the well-worn thinking groove, to stop trying to find a place of reassurance or finality, and to live with the sense of agitation, or uncertainty, or doubt, until it passes of its own accord (which it will do). Over one or two weeks, as the person faces the feeling of agitation and does not carry out the usual 'undoing rituals', the agitation decreases.

It may be necessary to use both approaches to tackle different aspects of the problem. Both panic attacks and intrusive thoughts have the same root: fear; so in the same way as it is possible to conquer panic (although it takes blood, sweat and tears), it is also possible to conquer intrusive thoughts.