

What are unwanted taboo thoughts?

Unwanted taboo thoughts can feel too shameful to say out loud. They're one of the most common forms of OCD, and one of the most treatable.

What they can look like

Harm

"What if I hurt someone I love?" "What if I lose control?"

Sexual

Unwanted sexual thoughts or images that feel wrong to you, including about family, children, or people you're not drawn to.

Religious and moral

Blasphemous thoughts during prayer. Fear that you've sinned, or that you're a bad person deep down.

Relationship and identity

"What if I don't really love my partner?"
"What if I'm not who I think I am?"

These thoughts hurt because they go against who you are.

OCD tends to target what matters most to you.

Why they stick

1

Thinking feels like doing

The thought feels as bad as an action, or as if it makes the action more likely.

2

Fighting backfires

The harder you push a thought away, the more often it comes back.

3

Chasing certainty

You look for 100% proof you'd never do it. That proof never comes, so the search keeps going.



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Myth vs fact

MYTH

Having this thought means part of me wants it.

FACT

Unwanted thoughts are the opposite of wishes. Your distress shows how much this goes against your values.

MYTH

If I think it, I might do it.

FACT

Thoughts aren't actions. There's no evidence that people with these obsessions are more likely to act on them.

MYTH

Good people don't have thoughts like this.

FACT

Most people have taboo intrusive thoughts. OCD just makes them stick.

MYTH

I need to be sure before I can relax.

FACT

No one has that kind of certainty. Therapy helps you live well without it.

Hidden compulsions to watch for

Checking your feelings or body for "signs"

Replaying memories to be sure nothing happened

Testing yourself with the thought

Avoiding knives, children, or places of worship

Asking "Am I a bad person?"

Confessing

Researching online

Praying or repeating until it feels right

What helps

1

Name it

"That's OCD showing me a scary thought."

2

Don't argue with it

No proving, no pushing away. Let it come and go.

3

Work on it in therapy

CBT with ERP is the most effective treatment for these thoughts.

You can say it in therapy.

A therapist who knows OCD has heard these thoughts many times. They won't change how you're seen.

This handout is about unwanted thoughts that cause you distress. If you ever feel unsafe, or have urges you want to act on, call 112 or 113 (0800-01113).



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