

Click to verify































OCD intrusive thoughtsDo they go away?How to stop intrusive thoughtsRecapObsessive thoughts are a formal symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). They're often unwanted, intrusive, and upsetting. But managing OCD intrusive thoughts may be possible. When living with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), you may spend most of your time and energy dealing with obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are intrusive thoughts that are difficult to stop and control. Compulsions are repetitive acts or rituals that you engage in to relieve some of the distress obsessions cause you. Everyone experiences intrusive thoughts from time to time. But as a formal symptom of OCD, these obsessions may be constant and can impact all areas of your life. Intrusive thoughts are images, ideas, or memories that may pop into your head repeatedly and at any time. You may find it hard to put these thoughts away at will. When you live with OCD, these obsessive thoughts can last more than an hour every day and negatively impact your mood and ability to function. Intrusive thoughts can have different themes. Some may not be unpleasant but the fact that they keep coming up may upset you and make you exhausted. Other times, these themes can be upsetting and frightful. For example, you may experience intrusive thoughts about hurting yourself. This doesn't mean you want to, but the images about you doing it keep popping into your head. Other examples of obsessive thoughts include: OCD intrusive and obsessive thoughts typically don't go away unless you receive formal OCD treatment. Although compulsions may help you reduce the anxiety caused by obsessive thoughts, these typically come back. This may also result in a lot of time and energy spent on rituals, which can be exhausting and upsetting. When you live with OCD, intrusive thoughts may last for a lifetime. If you're receiving treatment, it's likely that you may experience them less often or that you may learn to cope with them so they don't upset you as much. Currently, there isn't a cure for OCD, and without treatment, you may experience obsessive thoughts often. If you live with OCD, it's natural to want to know how to stop intrusive thoughts forever. This may not be as simple as taking medication, though. It's highly advisable that you receive formal OCD treatment, which may help you deal with intrusive thoughts and the need to engage in compulsions. Working hand in hand with a health professional, like a psychiatrist or psychologist, may help you make progress in dealing with intrusive thoughts and other symptoms. Some people with OCD develop symptoms of other conditions like anxiety and body dysmorphic disorder. Your therapist can help in identifying these or other symptoms and developing an all-inclusive management plan. They might also suggest specific types of psychotherapy that may work for your case, discuss possible OCD medications that could help, and support you in developing coping skills you can use at any moment. Exposure response prevention therapy is considered the first-line treatment for OCD symptoms. This type of therapy helps you manage obsessive thoughts and compulsions by exposing you to the first ones and preventing you from engaging in the latter. For example, say you repeatedly wash your hands (compulsion) because you experience intrusive thoughts that tell you, "If you don't wash your hands, you'll contract an illness and die." ERP therapy helps you experience these thoughts without having to engage in hand washing. In time, your distress may gradually disappear when you realize that not washing your hands constantly doesn't result in illness and death. Intrusive thoughts are, by definition, intrusive. This means they pop up without warning and you may have a hard time preventing or stopping them. But learning to quickly shift your attention away from intrusive thoughts may offer you some relief. However, try to keep in mind that OCD obsessions are typically difficult to control at will without the support of a professional. Evidence shows that your brain activity slows when you distract yourself, leading to fewer racing thoughts. And, even though this may work for you, it may only be temporary. Distractions may be more effective at helping you not engage in compulsions. Exercise may help you reduce compulsions and elevate your mood. It's possible that they also help you deal with intrusive thoughts. In general, exercising can help you reduce anxiety. For that, you may want to do some type of physical activity every day as a preventive habit. Exercising when experiencing distressing thoughts may offer some people relief in the moment. Intrusive thoughts are ideas and images that pop into your mind without notice and they tend to cause great distress. Intrusive obsessive thoughts are a formal symptom of OCD. Intrusive thoughts don't typically go away on their own and you may experience them often and persistently, particularly if you don't receive OCD treatment. Exposure response prevention therapy, grounding distractions, and exercising may help you deal with intrusive thoughts and corresponding compulsions. If you have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), you may find yourself trying to figure out how to stop OCD thoughts. You are not alone. While managing obsessive thoughts won't stop OCD, it can make coping with the condition easier. However, what many people with OCD don't realize is that the distressing thoughts they experience are not necessarily something that they have (or can have) control over. While this fact might initially make you feel stressed, understanding how your OCD thinking works and why it happens will help you develop more effective ways to cope. Alessandro De Carli / EyeEm / Getty Images A 2014 study published in the Journal of Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders interviewed 777 college students in 13 different countries and found that around 94% of them had experienced at least one unwanted intrusive thought during the previous three months. While many people experience these odd or even disturbing thoughts, most people don't register them as an issue in their daily lives. The problem is when they become not just intrusive but obsessive. A person with OCD can experience intrusive thoughts relentlessly and with an intensity that can seriously affect their well-being. Rather than having a neutral response to a passing thought, a person with OCD experiences a response in their mind and body. The more they persevere on the thought, the more anxiety they experience. The cycle can be distressing and may impact their ability to function. You may not be able to control whether an intrusive thought pops into your head, but you can control how you react to it. If you have OCD and struggle with intrusive thoughts, here is some key information about why these thoughts happen and how you can learn to cope with them. People with OCD may believe that simply thinking about something disturbing (such as molesting a neighbor or killing their spouse) is morally equivalent to carrying out the act. They may even believe that if they have a thought (such as getting into a car crash or contracting a serious disease), it means the event will happen—unless they do something to prevent it. This is called thought-action fusion, and it is one reason that intrusive thoughts are more distressing for people with OCD. Instead of letting their thoughts come and go, people with OCD often take personal responsibility for the thoughts they have. They also tend to interpret these thoughts as being more significant than they really are. Perceiving thoughts as being urgent and important makes a person feel that they must immediately act on or respond to them in the "right" way. A person with OCD may develop compulsions in response to their obsessive thoughts. Behavioral compulsions are actions and behaviors that are used in an attempt to alleviate the distress intrusive thoughts cause. Compulsions can be a little like superstitions for people with OCD. Often, the person recognizes that the behaviors are not rational (this is known as insight), but the fear of what they believe will happen if they don't perform them is compelling. Completing a ritual temporarily relieves the anxiety but keeps a person stuck in the cycle because it reinforces the obsessive thinking. For example, a person who obsesses about their home burning down while they are at work might compulsively check that the stove is off before they leave the house every day. When they return home at the end of the day and their house has not burned down, it reinforces the belief that their ritual (for example, checking a certain number of times or checking in a specific order) "worked." Compulsions can also be mental. For example, a person might believe that if they do not "think through" or analyze a thought sufficiently, it will become a reality. Thinking about a "bad" thought can also be an attempt to neutralize it or "balance it out." Repeatedly giving attention and mental energy to an intrusive thought can initially feel like productive problem-solving. In reality, the obsessive pattern of thinking doesn't usually give someone with OCD any helpful insight. In fact, it's more likely to make a person's anxiety worse. Perseverating also keeps the cycle of intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors going. While you might want to know how to stop OCD thoughts, trying to suppress or eliminate such thoughts can actually backfire. If a person with OCD believes that their intrusive thoughts are dangerous, they may try to closely monitor them. It may feel like necessary vigilance, but the intensity with which someone monitors their own thinking can easily become hypervigilance. Once a person labels a certain thought as dangerous and becomes hyperaware of it, they can become overwhelmed. When this happens, they might respond by trying to push the thought away. While it might seem like a good solution, it's not easy—and it doesn't necessarily work. Research has shown that thought suppression in people with OCD can lead to the development of more intrusive thoughts. Accepting the thoughts does not mean you are giving up. Understanding that you don't have control does not mean you are giving the intrusive thoughts control over you. You can be aware of an intrusive thought without trying to stop it. You can start by trying to recognize that the thought is trying to control you (for example, by making you feel the need to perform a compulsion) and consciously challenging it. The first step you take might be to simply pause when the thought comes up rather than immediately responding to its urgent demand. It might be uncomfortable to consider the thought from a distance and resist the urge to perform a ritual. Over time, defusing your obsessive thoughts this way can actually help you feel more in control. Once you are able to put some space between you and your thoughts, you can start to look at them more objectively. Then, you can figure out what triggers the thoughts and take a closer (but non-judgmental) look at how you react. Try not to be too hard on yourself or get discouraged during this process. It takes practice to distance yourself from your thoughts. Obsessive thinking is intense and persistent by nature. Sometimes, instructing yourself not to think about a thought only brings more attention to it. Even if you don't experience thought-action fusion, you likely have to deal with obsessive thoughts on a daily basis if you have OCD. You may feel so overwhelmed at times that you would give anything to stop the cycle. Although it is easier to say than to believe, thoughts are just strings of words and are not inherently dangerous. You are not obliged to take a thought seriously just because your brain generated it. The intrusive thoughts you experience are not necessarily a reflection of who you are, but when they become obsessive, they can be influenced by the things that cause you the most worry and anxiety. Moreover, your thoughts do not necessarily say anything about you. Having a "bad" thought does not mean that you are a "bad" person. Try to remember that intrusive thoughts don't always align with your core values, beliefs, and morals. In fact, OCD thoughts tend to attack and focus on the things that offend you. The same can be true for intrusive thoughts that cause fear, which tend to be based on what you are most concerned about (for example, the health and safety of your family). People with OCD can feel an overwhelming amount of fear and guilt about the intrusive thoughts they experience. They may also experience deep shame, embarrassment, and even self-hatred. Try to be kind and patient with yourself. Remember that everyone experiences intrusive thoughts at times, and they are not something you are expected to be in control of. It is a good practice to recognize the intrusive thought or feeling you are having, but that does not mean you have to identify with it. Once you accept that you cannot completely control your thoughts, you can start building the habit of acknowledging them without letting them take control. People with OCD can also experience depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and other mental health conditions. If your OCD thoughts are making it hard for you to function at home, school, or work, and you feel that you cannot cope with them, talk to a doctor or mental health professional. While it can be difficult to ask for help, there are treatments for OCD that could help you feel better. Many people with OCD take one or more medications to help them manage symptoms. They may take antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, or other commonly prescribed drugs for mental health conditions. Some people with OCD also use herbal or natural supplements to help manage their symptoms. However, it is not always safe to take these products with prescription medications. If you want to try an alternative remedy, ask a doctor. Several types of psychotherapy can be used to help someone with OCD manage obsessive thoughts. The most common is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), specifically an approach known as exposure therapy. People with OCD are often treated using an approach called exposure and response prevention therapy (ERP). In ERP, you and a therapist will work directly with your obsessive thoughts as well as any associated compulsions. You will use techniques like role-playing situations that cause you distress and talking through your thought process with your therapist. It might feel overwhelming or frightening to think about confronting your thoughts, but keep in mind that exposure work is done slowly, gradually, and with plenty of support. We've tried, tested, and written unbiased reviews of the best online therapy programs including Talkspace, Betterhelp, and Regain. Find out which option is the best for you. If you have OCD, mindfulness techniques may help you develop a more objective perspective on your obsessive thoughts. Mindfulness exercises might already be part of your therapy, but you can also try them on your own. There are even apps you can use to track your progress. Many people with OCD ultimately need more than one type of treatment to effectively manage their symptoms. A doctor or therapist can help you find the combination that works best for you. Everyone experiences occasional intrusive thoughts. While they can be odd or even disturbing, most people don't think too much about them—the thoughts simply come and go. If you have OCD, however, these thoughts can become obsessive. You may find it difficult to cope, and they may make it hard for you to function in your daily life. Try to resist the urge to push the intrusive thoughts away. Suppression might feel like a logical solution, but it can actually intensify, rather than lessen, the obsessiveness and distress you experience around them. Your thoughts are real, but make it your goal to acknowledge them without identifying with them. It can help if you avoid analyzing or questioning these thoughts too much, which will only keep the cycle going. If you are struggling to cope with intrusive thoughts, talk to a doctor or a mental health provider. If you have OCD, there are treatments that can help you manage your symptoms. Frequently Asked Questions While medication and therapy are the first-line treatment options, there are strategies you can use on your own to manage OCD. Get enough sleep: Research has found that poor sleep quality is associated with more severe OCD symptoms. Get regular exercise: One study found that aerobic exercise may lead to reductions in OCD symptoms, particularly when used to augment other OCD treatments. Manage stress: High-stress levels can worsen OCD thoughts and behaviors. Relaxation strategies that relieve stress can help, such as mindfulness, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation. OCD doesn't just go away and there is no "cure" for the condition. While it may not be possible to stop OCD and obsessive thoughts entirely, you can learn how to manage the symptoms and live with the condition. The two main treatments for OCD, medication and talk therapy, can be very effective for relieving OCD. Medications can help relieve symptoms of OCD, and talk therapy can help people learn to manage OCD thoughts and learn to better tolerate feelings of distress.