
S3C8. Intrusive thoughts and anxiety

You would have experienced the following three states from time to time:

1. Anxiety without intrusive thoughts about your relationship
2. Intrusive thoughts without any accompanying anxiety.
3. Anxiety with intrusive thoughts about your relationship.

The above three states show us that anxiety and intrusive thoughts can exist without one another. Hence, anxiety and intrusive thoughts are not connected and intrusive thoughts don't bring anxiety. Let me say it again for emphasis in italics. *Intrusive thoughts don't bring anxiety.*

Think about how anxiety manifests in your body. It manifests physically. Anxiety is the result of the secretion of certain hormones (adrenaline, cortisol and many others, but never mind the names) in your body. When these hormones are secreted, you feel the effects in the form of racing heartbeat, perspiration, dizziness, heaviness in the chest, etc. These hormones can get secreted any time the brain thinks there is danger around, whether there is any danger in reality or not. So, when you need to speak in front of a hundred people, there's no real danger, but you may still experience anxiety because of this biological process.

Thoughts are a stringing together of words in your mind, in a language you know, and about a context relevant to you. You can't think in Mandarin if you don't speak it. And you can't think about your job role in NASA if you don't work there (except perhaps as a desire). What meaning you assign to this group of words in your mind is entirely left to your discretion. You give your thoughts the power. The thought may not have the power if you choose to not give it.

In ROCD, intrusive thoughts about your relationship get stuck in your brain. You have the power to decide whether you want to give them meaning or not. For example, if I get the thought of being able to fly, it does not mean I will begin to fly in reality. So, if I am getting such a thought, no matter how real it seems, I will not jump off a terrace. I will refuse to give meaning to the thought. Similarly, we can choose to not give meaning to the intrusive ROCD thoughts.

Sometimes the two (thoughts and anxiety) may co-occur and you may mistakenly associate the two as having a causal connection and create a relationship between them. You may believe that to make the anxiety go away you need to make the thought go away. That's where the problem lies. Since the two are unrelated, it won't work.

Think of your adrenaline gland as a leaking tap. It releases some adrenaline that brings about the anxiety. Now think of your intrusive thoughts as the result of an electric switch that is turned on. Your ROCD brain thinks that in order to make the anxiety go away, the thoughts need to be switched off. So, you may try to turn the

CONCEPTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

switch off. But the anxiety tap will not get turned off by an unrelated thought switch.

Since that does not work, and the anxiety does not go down, you may try to make it work repeatedly. When repetition does not work to reduce the anxiety either, panic ensues and that causes another burst of adrenaline to get released in the body, leading to more anxiety. This becomes cyclical. The failed attempt to stop the thoughts causes anxiety and the anxiety causes you to try to control the thoughts more.

If you recognize that turning off a switch will not help in turning off a tap, the connection in the mind can be broken. When you learn to break this connection, you can choose to deal with the anxiety and thoughts separately. Through the process of cognitive defusion, you can learn to accept the thoughts rather than try to push them away. Through mindfulness, you can learn to consider your anxiety as separate feelings in separate parts of the body and accept them as well, without trying to attach any meaning or build a connection.

Since anxiety is a result of excess anxiety hormones in the body, when the hormones get metabolized, the anxiety will dissipate on its own. Thus, if you internalize that trying to deal with the thoughts will not make the anxiety go away, you can learn to accept your thoughts and you will allow the anxiety to dissipate on its own. Understanding that the thoughts and anxiety are not related to each other will help in this process of anxiety dissipation.

In the next chapter, we shall understand the layered attack of ROCD.