

Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts



When we are confronted by painful thoughts or memories it is natural to want to push them away. Unfortunately, human beings are not very good at **not** thinking of something.

You can try this for yourself:

For the next 30 seconds, *try as hard as you can* not to think of a white bear.

Count how many times you think of a white bear.

You will probably find that it's quite difficult.

What we know is that the more we try to not think of something, the more we end up thinking about it (we have intrusive unwanted thoughts about the thing we are trying to suppress). Worse, once we have stopped trying-not-to-think-of-something there is a tendency to think more than usual about that thing for some time after. This is called the 'rebound effect'.

This effect is even stronger when we try to suppress something emotional, and we know that people with anxiety or depression tend to find it even more difficult to suppress unwanted thoughts.

Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts

Everybody has intrusive thoughts, images, or memories. Intrusive thoughts are ones we did not choose to have: they 'intrude' into our conscious mind.

When we are confronted by painful thoughts or memories it is natural to want to push them away. Unfortunately, human brains are not very good at **not thinking** of something.

You can do a behavioural experiment to try this for yourself. Follow these instructions and notice what happens:

For the next 60 seconds, *try as hard as you can not to think of a white bear*. Use all of your mental strength.

Count how many times you think of a white bear.



What did you notice? You will probably find that it's quite difficult. Psychologists have discovered that the more we try to not think of something, the more we end up thinking about it: we have intrusive unwanted thoughts about the thought we are trying to suppress. Worse, once we have stopped trying to suppress the thought there is a tendency to think more than usual about that thing for some time after. This is called the 'rebound effect'.

This effect is even stronger when we try to suppress an emotional thought. Try another quick behavioral experiment:

For the next 60 seconds, *try as hard as you can not to think of:*

- a smelly man giving you a hug, or
- a huge spider crawling in your hair.

Count how many times you think of that thing.

Was it the same as before? Or more difficult?

Finally, we know that people with anxiety or depression tend to find it even more difficult to suppress their unwanted thoughts.