

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts



Description

Thought suppression is a cognitive strategy thoroughly investigated by experimental psychologists. It has particularly strong applicability to clinical work.

The basic finding is that the harder one tries not to think of something, the more that item intrudes into consciousness. This effect is stronger for thoughts that have emotional content. Thought suppression is a common feature of problems such as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) where individuals attempt to suppress intrusive thoughts. Intrusive thoughts and thought suppression are also features of other clinical conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. There is evidence that techniques such as cognitive restructuring, or mindfulness/acceptance are helpful techniques for managing intrusive cognitions. This *Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts* information sheet gives a simple outline of thought suppression, and the effects of trying to suppress intrusive thoughts.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout.

Suggested uses include:

- Client handout – use as a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – use to provoke a discussion and explore client beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Teaching resource – use as a learning tool during training.

Thought suppression is most powerfully explained by a demonstration. This *Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts* information handout gives clear instructions for how to carry out the 'white bear' experiment.

References

Wegner, D.M. (1989). *White bears and other unwanted thoughts: Suppression, obsession, and the psychology of mental control*. London: The Guilford Press.

Wegner, D. M. (2011). Setting free the bears: Escape from thought suppression. *American Psychologist*, 671-680.

Wegner, D. M., Schneider, D. J., Carter, S. III., White, L. (1987). Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 5-13.

Wenzlaff, R. M., Wegner, D. M. (2000). Thought suppression. *Annual Reviews in Psychology*, 51, 59-91.

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.

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Resource details

Title: Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts

Type: Information Handout

Language: English (US)

Translated title: Thought Suppression And Intrusive Thoughts

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/thought-suppression-and-intrusive-thoughts>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: JP

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