

Intrusive thoughts and flashbacks



Introduction

What are intrusive thoughts?

Occasionally, people that have been exposed to traumatic stories might have intrusive thoughts, which are distressing ideas and memories that suddenly and unexpectedly come to mind and trigger a response of fear, worry, or grief.

What are flashbacks?

At times thoughts and memories can be so strong that they feel like they are really happening, or that the person is transported to the traumatic event. These are called flashbacks. Sometimes professionals may have a very vivid imagination, so when a person is talking about a traumatic experience, it plays “like a movie” in their mind. The imagery is then repeated intrusively. While flashbacks are not common in secondary trauma, repetition in our minds of scenarios from what our clients have shared with us is more common.

Why do they occur?

Intrusive thoughts and flashbacks happen as we are trying to process information that is difficult. Our brain tries to make sense, to see the logic of an event, but cannot. They can also occur in response to triggers, which also might be difficult to pinpoint, as they can happen very quickly. The triggers, as well as flashbacks and intrusive thought at times activate the emergency response in our system, and so they feel as if we are in danger even if the current situation is perfectly safe.

Intrusive thoughts and flashbacks happen as we are trying to process information that is difficult. Our brain tries to make sense, to see the logic of an event, but cannot.

What to do about them?

First, observe the severity. You can notice if intrusive thoughts or flashbacks are affecting your work, or your spare time, and if they are affecting activities that you used to do. Even if they are not, they might be very distressing when they happen. If so, the best idea is to seek help. A trauma-informed counselor can provide supportive counselling using some of the tools and techniques that are outlined below. You can also try some of the strategies below on your own, ensuring you seek help and support when needed.






Tools

Below are some fundamental tools and techniques that will prepare you for working with intrusive thoughts and flashbacks. Prior to trying any of these tools, it is important to prepare yourself and ensure that you are feeling well and healthy.

Preparing yourself

All secondary trauma, and in particular intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, are ways in which your mind and body try to face the challenge of a traumatic memory. Before we look at tools to manage the thoughts, it's important to start with your body. Imagine that you are going to run a marathon. You would not do it without training or preparation and it's important to ensure you are ready. The suggestions below are designed to prepare you physically so that you are ready to work through the challenges presented by secondary trauma.

<p>Physical Activity</p> 	<p>Any physical activity that gets your heart and brain working and brings on a sweat can be helpful for ensuring you are getting enough exercise daily. Aerobic exercise is best for this (as opposed to lifting weights, for example). If mild, such as walking, it might take a good 40 minutes to achieve this state. If more intense, such as jogging, 15 minutes should suffice. Any activity that raises your heart rate such as swimming, dancing, and bike riding can also be beneficial.</p> <p>If you are just starting physical activity after a period of inactivity, be patient and start slowly depending on your level of fitness. It is a good idea to consult a physician if you have injuries or conditions that might affect your physical activity.</p>
<p>Eating well</p> 	<p>Secondary trauma can impact your appetite and you may find that you are either eating less or more than usual. It is recommended to have a healthy selection of food to ensure that your body is receiving a balanced diet. Try to avoid simple sugars, such as refined flours, foods with high levels of sugar or sugary drinks. If you do have sugar, try to combine it with food that has fiber such as fruit and nuts.</p> <p>The reason to avoid sugar is that it is processed very quickly in your body, giving you a “high” that unfortunately might trigger your emergency response system. This can make flashbacks and intrusive thoughts worse. By combining sugar with fiber, the sugar is processed in the body more slowly, giving a different effect.</p>
<p>Sleeping well</p> 	<p>If the intrusive thoughts and flashbacks are worse in the evening, sleeping might be a problem. Try to improve sleep habits, such as getting to bed at the same time, avoiding screens one hour before</p>


	bed, and doing a calming activity just before sleep such as having a bath, meditating, or reading a book.
--	---

Fundamental Skills

Below are some fundamental skills that you may wish to try to begin managing intrusive thoughts and flashbacks. It is recommended that you work through these tools step by step, only moving onto new tools after you have mastered the previous skill. It is also recommended that you try these exercises at a specific time of the day when you know you can be more relaxed. You may wish to take time in the middle of the day to diminish stress and to engage in a bit of self-care.

Before you begin any exercise, start by breathing and grounding. Then, begin your chosen exercise. If thoughts or images come at another time of the day, remind yourself that you are doing something about them, that you are taking care of yourself, and there is a time to address them during the day. If they persist, you can do breathing and grounding as outlined. The important thing is that you set aside time to practice regularly and you don't miss the time you have allocated to complete the exercises. Little by little, over time, thoughts and images will reduce.

If at any point, however, you feel overwhelmed or the thoughts and flashbacks are worsening, it's important to seek professional help.

Thought stopping	
	Distressing thoughts can happen when triggered or at times emerge without noticing. If you try to fight too hard against them, the thoughts can become stronger and harder to let go of. Instead of pushing thoughts away quickly, the first step is to recognize them.
Three Repetitions	<p>You can do this with three repetitions.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When you have distressing thoughts, say to yourself "I'm thinking..." and repeat it three times. 2. Next you move to the things that you notice in your body. Say to yourself, "I'm feeling..." and repeat it three times.
Let go	<p>The main idea is that thoughts come and go, and when we notice them, we can move on to other things that we notice in our bodies. Maybe, you have other thoughts that emerge. Each time, repeat the three repetitions and then let them go.</p> <p>The important thing is that you then come back to your body each time, focusing on what you are feeling, or sensing. The longer you practice, you'll notice fewer and fewer thoughts arising, and you'll be able to notice</p>

	more what you perceive outside and inside your body. This is also a good way to start practicing grounding.
--	---

Grounding: tools that bring you back to the present moment.

As outlined in the introduction, intrusive thoughts and flashbacks can occur when you have been exposed to traumatic stories. These distressing ideas, images and memories can occur suddenly and unexpectedly and your body reacts with the same response as if the threat were in the present moment. By grounding, you are bringing your body and mind back into the present moment.

For a full outline of grounding tools, please see the grounding handout for more tips on practicing this skill.

Imagery Control

Imagining the stories our clients tell usually serves as a way to generate empathy. The images, however, can become intrusive and you may experience the emergence of the images at times when you are triggered. Because the imagery is something we generated in our minds (as opposed to memories of the images we saw in person), it is important to learn that we are able to have control over the images. The following exercise can be done as a preventative measure, and then later as a way of controlling images that may emerge from the stories we hear.

TV Exercise



(Adapted from Rothschild, B. 2006. p154)

First, ground yourself so that you are fully present.

Next, imagine you are in a room that is calm and relaxing with a TV.

Step 1:


Imagine what the room is like, what type of seating, the source of light and how the TV looks. You have the TV control in your hand.

Step 2:

Turn the TV on and imagine that you are watching a pleasant or neutral program. You have the TV controller in your hand and you can adjust and alter the picture, color and speed of the images as you wish.




Step 3:

Practice changing the images, the picture, the quality of the image and the speed until you feel that you have control over the images.

<p>When flashbacks occur</p> 	<p>When a flashback or an intrusive image occurs, use the skills that you have been practicing.</p> <p>Step 1: See the images that are happening and distance yourself from them.</p> <p>Step 2: Use the skills that you learned from the TV exercise. Try techniques such as blurring the image, moving away from them, or turn the image off all together.</p> <p>Continue to practice grounding exercise and seek support from a professional if you find you are not able to control the images.</p>
---	---

Using the expressive arts

The expressive arts can be very useful tools for processing distressing thoughts and images. You can try these techniques on your own or you may wish to work with a counsellor or expressive arts therapist.

 <p>Writing</p>	<p>You may wish to try writing a poem. It does not have to be very complicated, just reflect on your thoughts and images and write what you feel like with a metaphor or simile. For instance, “when I see these images it feels like...” or “these thoughts are like...”.</p>
 <p>Painting or drawing</p>	<p>Drawing and painting can be effective ways of processing images and can also be very calming and increasing mindfulness. If you are feeling distressed, using colored markers or pencils to create abstract images can help to sooth and relieve stress.</p> <p>If you would like to draw and process the traumatic images you are experiencing, it is recommended that you do this with a counsellor or expressive arts therapist.</p>
 <p>Creating a safe place image</p>	<p>It can be very helpful to have a place in your mind that you can go to where you feel safe. You can bring up the image of this place at anytime when you feel triggered or unsafe. In order to help with remembering the image of the safe place, you may wish to draw, paint or write about it. You can then keep the image near you and if you are feeling triggered,</p>

	<p>reflect on the image, breath, ground and remember that you are safe.</p> <p>Steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Imagine a place (real or imaginary) where you feel completely safe.2. What do you see around you?3. What can you touch, see?4. As you imagine yourself in this space, how do you feel?5. Where in your body do you feel this?6. Is there a word that you can give to your safe space?7. Imagine yourself there now and breathe deeply, feeling the calm and the peace. <p>Then, draw, paint or write about the image so it is there for you whenever you need it.</p>
--	--



Finally, and very importantly, if you feel that these thoughts or images are:

- Affecting the way you work, live, or spend your free time
- Are interrupting or complicating your relationships,
- Influencing your use (or overuse) of alcohol or other substances (for example, sugar, marijuana or other drugs)

Please seek help from an experienced trauma counselor.



References & Further Reading

Gregerson, M. B. J. (2007). Creativity enhances practitioners' resiliency and effectiveness after a hometown disaster. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 38(6), 596.

Rothschild, B. (2006). *Help for the helper: The psychophysiology of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma*. WW Norton & Company.

Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2010). *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. ReadHowYouWant. com.