

THOUGHTS YOU CAN'T SEEM TO GET RID OF

We all have thoughts that we wish we could just push out of our minds. They might be thoughts that upset, scare, worry or annoy us. Either way, we wish they weren't there. You may have tried all sorts of things to deal with them. This sheet looks at some of these methods and suggests a few alternatives.



Reason one

The vast majority of the thoughts that we try to put to the back of our mind seem painful. They may make us feel upset, desperate, angry, afraid or fearful. They may spark off other thoughts or memories or change our emotions. The fear of this pain is real and completely normal. Or maybe it's not pain, we're just unsure what they'll bring up with them and that uncertainty is unbearable.



Here's the big idea though: anxiety and uncertainty acts as a bluffer. Imagine you're sat at a poker table and 'Mr Anxiety' or 'Mr Uncertainty' is sat opposite you in one of those big, old school trench coats and a pair of dark sunglasses. He has his hand of cards and each card represents a thought or a feeling or a memory. And he sits opposite you, waving a card and saying, 'this one will break you'. Mr Anxiety might make all kinds of threats, but the truth is that the reality is never as bad as you fear it will be. There may be discomfort or some pain, but it is never as bad as your anxiety makes you fear it will be.

The problem is, the more dangerous something is, the stronger your reaction needs to be. Therefore, reacting strongly to thoughts makes your brain reason, 'oh, there must actually be a danger here after all so I'd better deal with it'. This is one reason why pushing the thought away makes it come back, your brain wants to deal with the threat. Reacting to thoughts in a gentler way helps your brain understand that there is no threat after all and that there's no need to fear.



Reason two

You might have heard the phrase ‘the more you put in, the more you get out’ and this is normally true. You’d think this would mean that the more effort you use to combat unwanted thoughts, the more successful you’ll be. Unfortunately, our thoughts don’t follow this rule. You could summarise this as ‘the energy you use causes the strength of the return’.

To visualise this, imagine an elastic band. If you loop one end of the band over your thumb, stretch the other end back as far as you can then let go, the energy you used to stretch the band back will make it fly forward really quickly and hit your thumb. It’ll probably hurt.

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Our thoughts work in the same way. The more effort and energy you use to push thoughts, feelings and memories away, the more force they’ll eventually come back with. This force may look like them coming back more often, being ‘stronger’ or being harder to shift next time. After a few times round the cycle, they seem overwhelming.

This is why one of the major parts of therapy is changing the way we deal with our thoughts. Instead of fighting them off, we try to accept their presence then bring some balance.



Now what?

So these are the two reasons that thoughts seem to keep coming back. Pushing them away teaches us that the threat they’re warning about is real, so we HAVE to deal with them. Because they seem so threatening, we try to get rid of them with lots of force. This makes them spring back with an equal ferocity. So if we can’t push the thoughts away but we don’t want to be passive and let them run riot, what can we do?

The goal here is balance. Anything you can do to acknowledge the thought and any emotions and memories it may link to then pivot into something else is helpful.



For example The simple phrase ‘Yes, sure, but...’ can be extremely powerful here. When a thought comes up, simply say to yourself, ‘Ok, sure, there’s X thought again but I also know that Y and Z are true’.

In this example, Y and Z can be any fact which counters the difficult thought. This could be ‘sure but I know that I can cope better with my emotions now’ or ‘I know that I’m trying my best’. We acknowledge, then move into something more useful.

A second method is focusing on the choice you now have. This could look like ‘OK, I could think about X. But it’ll probably feel better and be more useful to think about Y’.

Importantly this is different from swapping a bad thought for a good one because we are acknowledging that we could think about the bad one if we wanted to. We just don’t want to right now. This takes the force out of the choice and removing that force is how things will change.

