

Coping with Intrusive Thoughts after a Traumatic Loss

What are intrusive thoughts?

- Intrusive thoughts are upsetting memories of a traumatic event that enter a survivor's mind even when they are trying not to think about it.
- Survivors may feel the same upsetting and overwhelming reactions they had when the event occurred.
- Survivors often report that intrusive thoughts are some of the most difficult trauma reactions to manage, but there are steps you can take to decrease their frequency and intensity.

Here are some techniques you can use to gain control over intrusive thoughts:

1. Notice

- If you notice that you are having an intrusive thought, consciously ask yourself: Is there anything I will gain from recalling that moment?
- Give yourself permission not to relive that moment.
- Remind yourself: Your loved one deserves to be honored for who they were and what they contributed when they lived. You don't need to focus on the circumstances of their death.

2. Breathe

- Controlled breathing has a physiological effect on your body that slows the heart rate and allows the brain to refocus on the sensation of taking slow breaths.
- If you experience anxiety, sadness, anger, or any other distressing emotions associated with an intrusive thought, you can try to ease it by slowing down your breathing:
 - a. Get in a comfortable position.
 - b. Inhale slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
 - c. Pause and hold the breath for about 4 seconds.
 - d. Exhale slowly through your mouth for about 5 seconds.
 - e. Try to breathe from your stomach rather than your chest. Deep breaths should move your abdomen area in and out.
 - f. Listen to your breathing and try to keep it as even as possible

3. Replace

- Again, you don't need to focus on the distressing events surrounding the loss of your loved one.
- Here are some ways you can replace your distressing thoughts with comforting ones:
 - a. Allow yourself to recall a special or happy memory with your loved one.
 - b. If you are comforted by relaxing imagery, imagine a place that feels peaceful to you.
 - c. Try refocusing on literally any other topic---the topic is less important than the process of giving the brain another thought to focus on. Here are some examples:

1. Think about the top five sports moments in history.
2. Imagine the design of a beautiful dress.
3. Recall your favorite episode of your favorite TV show.

4. Redirect

- Your senses can be very helpful in refocusing your mind on the present moment.
- Use “grounding techniques” to reorient yourself back to this current moment:
 - a. Splash cold water on your face or hold an ice cube in your hand.
 - b. Drink something hot or cold.
 - c. Notice colors or objects around the room. Count how many blue items you see.
 - d. Smell something with an aroma you enjoy, such as a scented candle, a food, or a bathroom product.
 - e. Listen to the sounds of the environment around you. Can you hear the air conditioner or heater? Do you hear traffic in the distance?
 - f. Pay attention to how your body feels. Are you warm? Cold? Are your shoes comfortable? Are you comfortable in the position you are sitting in?

5. Reflect

- Intrusive thoughts are sometimes triggered by something happening in your environment. Becoming aware of potential triggers can give you more control over your thoughts, even if you can’t avoid the triggers entirely.
- When you feel calm, reflect on what might be causing your intrusive thoughts:
 - a. Are there certain times of day that these thoughts seem most likely to occur?
 - b. Are the memories of the event linked to the people you are with? Or linked to the place where you currently are?
 - c. Is there a sensory component to the thought you are experiencing? Are certain smells, sights, or sounds possible triggers?
 - d. Is there anything going on in the environment that could remind you of aspects of the event? Certain topics being discussed? Certain material being viewed on TV or on social media?