



# Appraisals of and recommendations for managing intrusive thoughts: An empirical investigation



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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated strategies for managing intrusive thoughts. Eighty undergraduate students read vignettes of intrusive thoughts – blasphemous, sexual, and violent – which varied in frequency of the thought (high or low) and who experienced the thought (self or other). Appraisal ratings of thoughts were completed and participants completed a response strategy survey where they indicated how much they would endorse various methods for dealing with the thoughts. Some response strategies were theorized to help with intrusive thoughts and some were theorized to be unhelpful. Measures of obsessive-compulsive tendencies were completed to determine relationships between beliefs and appraisals as well as responses to the intrusive thoughts. Results indicated the more distressing a thought was perceived to be, the more likely participants were to recommend unhelpful strategies. Conversely, the less distressing the thought was, the more likely participants were to recommend helpful strategies. Ratings of distress and patterns of responses were related to obsessive-compulsive beliefs as well. Findings are discussed in terms of their relationship to the cognitive behavioral model of OCD, intrusive thoughts, and how future work may serve to educate and reduce stigma related to these common yet distressing experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

Although it is widely known that individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) are distressed by their intrusive thoughts (e.g., Ólafsson et al., 2014), limited attention has been paid to how individuals in the general population perceive others with intrusions or how they would interpret hypothetical intrusive thoughts if they experienced them themselves (see Corcoran and Woody, 2008). What little research has been conducted in the area of perceptions of intrusive thoughts demonstrates that individuals with such thoughts are evaluated negatively (e.g., Simonds and Thorpe, 2003). It is possible this negative evaluation would influence recommendations people make for how to deal with the thoughts, though this has, to date, not been tested. The present study served to expand upon previous work exploring factors related to the evaluation of intrusive thoughts, such as the frequency of intrusive thoughts (Corcoran and Woody, 2008), the person experiencing the intrusive thoughts (Cathey and Wetterneck, 2013), and the type of thought experienced (Corcoran and Woody, 2008), and determining if these factors are related to how individuals would anticipate behaving in response to, or

recommending others behave in response to, these intrusions. Although a consistent relationship has been found in terms of how individuals with OCD respond to their thoughts, by using thought suppression or behaviors such as compulsions that appear to increase, rather than decrease the likelihood that the thoughts occur (Parrish and Radomsky, 2010), it remains unknown how personal evaluations of thoughts in the general population relate to the perceived benefit of various strategies for managing these intrusions. Such an investigation would help develop theories for why people engage in certain behaviors in response to intrusive thoughts, despite the data indicating such behaviors are unhelpful (e.g. Salkovskis et al., 1997).

One explanation for why intrusive thoughts are evaluated so poorly is that these thoughts are not generally identified as being due to OCD. Research has demonstrated that participants generally have no knowledge that “taboo” thoughts may occur at a high frequency for individuals with OCD and, thus, mislabel the problem the person is having (Warman et al., 2015). It is not surprising individuals in the general population struggle with identifying symptoms of OCD (Coles et al., 2013), as even mental health clinicians struggle with identifying taboo thoughts as symptoms of OCD (Glazier et al., 2013). In a recent study, Warman et al. (2015) demonstrated that even when participants were *told* a person with violent thoughts had OCD, the OCD diagnosis was rejected. In contrast to Cognitive Behavioral Theory, which posits intrusive

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thoughts are meaningless thoughts given too much significance by the person (e.g., Salkovskis, 1989), taboo thoughts often are considered significant and meaningful thoughts to people and, thus, are evaluated negatively (e.g., Corcoran and Woody, 2008). This is particularly true for individuals who have high levels of OCD beliefs, even when investigations have not been limited to individuals with OCD, but have examined these relationships in individuals in the general population or participants from university participant pools (e.g., Corcoran and Woody, 2008).

Although vignette research of intrusive thoughts is rare, as noted earlier preliminary data suggests taboo thoughts are perceived negatively. Simonds and Thorpe (2003) presented vignettes to participants that varied in terms of their OCD presentations and found the target with violent thoughts was perceived the most negatively. Further, Cathey and Wetterneck (2013) found sexual taboo thoughts were perceived more negatively than intrusive thoughts related to contamination. In sum, of the limited research conducted to date of perceptions of individuals with OCD, individuals with intrusive taboo thoughts are rated the most negatively.

In arguably the most comprehensive experimental examination of perceptions of intrusive thoughts associated with OCD, Corcoran and Woody (2008) found a number of factors related to appraisals of taboo intrusive thoughts. In their first study, they manipulated the person in their vignette who experienced the occasional intrusive thought presented – the self or another person – and found participants did not report finding the occasional intrusive thoughts in the vignettes too significant, regardless of the thought's source. They did find, however, that the perceived significance of the thought varied depending on the theme of the thought; violent obsessions were seen as the most significant. Although the initial study found no difference between self and other, the study only explored thoughts occurring at a low frequency, which has consistently been shown to correlate with low appraisals of personal significance. Cathey and Wetterneck (2013) additionally found compelling and conflicting evidence that disclosure of an intrusion by a friend was judged more harshly than disclosure of one by a significant other. As personal responsibility is a factor considered highly related to evaluations made by individuals with OCD in response to their intrusive thoughts (e.g. Barrera and Norton, 2011), continued investigation of how people make evaluations of intrusive thoughts and how these evaluations are related to whether they are experienced by the self or another person, particularly under conditions considered more disturbing, such as when the thought occurs at a high frequency (Corcoran and Woody, 2008) is valuable.

Although Corcoran and Woody's (2008) first experimental investigation examined only thoughts that occurred at a low frequency, a second study they reported varied how often the person in the vignette experienced the thought. As expected, taboo thoughts that happened at a higher frequency were evaluated as more significant than low frequency thoughts. In contrast to their first study, the sexual thought emerged as the most distressing in their second study. In addition, they found individuals with higher levels of OC related beliefs rated the intrusive thoughts to be particularly meaningful, regardless of the frequency of the thought. Corcoran and Woody's studies are unique in their investigation of perceptions of taboo thoughts and participants' appraisals of such thoughts. What remains unclear is how these negative interpretations of intrusive thoughts might be related to strategies individuals would recommend for dealing with such thoughts and how those strategies may relate to OC related beliefs.

Individuals with OCD often use unhelpful strategies, or strategies with the potential to backfire by increasing frequency of and distress associated with an intrusion, to manage such upsetting thoughts (e.g., Rachman, 1997). While for many, these thoughts

and reactions to them can be absorbed within a normal mood state (see Julien, O'Conner, and Aardema, 2007, for a review), for others, such as those with OCD, neutralization, thought suppression, or rituals may increase the overwhelming personal significance assigned to the thought (Abramowitz, 2006). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy works to reduce misinterpretation of intrusions and reduce the use of strategies, such as thought control or avoidance, which may paradoxically increase thought frequency rather than reduce it (Rachman, 2003).

Other treatment types, such as stress management training, have also shown promise in reducing the experience of obsessional thoughts (Woody et al., 2011). It is noted that appraisals may also follow a reduction in obsessions through treatment rather than predict them (Woody et al., 2011). This body of research has focused extensively on the potential relationships between appraisal and type of therapy on the experience of intrusive thoughts. However, it has yet to be extended to study the relationship between appraisal, factors related to evaluation of intrusive experiences (including thought content, frequency, and who is experiencing the thought), and specific strategies, such as thought suppression, avoidance, or acceptance, which the literature has identified as common responses to intrusive experiences. This comprehensive study could provide fruitful contribution to the understanding, assessment, and treatment of intrusive thoughts.

Given the extant findings reviewed above and the questions left unanswered to date, we posed the question of what participants would do when asked what they would recommend to a person experiencing intrusive thoughts in vignettes and how this would relate to the frequency of the intrusive thought, the content of the intrusive thought, the person experiencing the thought, and levels of OC related beliefs. Given Corcoran and Woody's (2008) comprehensive investigation of many of these variables, we utilized their general methodology but sought to make it more comprehensive by investigating the person experiencing the thought as well as how participants would *respond* to the thoughts or make recommendations for someone else experiencing such thoughts. The survey completed listed helpful and unhelpful strategies for dealing with intrusive thoughts that were determined from a review of the literature (e.g. Berry et al., 2010).

We tested a number of hypotheses in the present study. First, we expected, following the findings of Corcoran and Woody, to find that high frequency taboo thoughts would be interpreted more negatively than low frequency thoughts. Corcoran and Woody (2008) found no effect for self vs. other in their study, but they limited their examination of self vs other to low frequency thoughts, a condition perceived less negatively than high frequency thoughts in one of their investigations. As a result, we expected no self vs other effect to emerge in our low frequency conditions. However, as personal responsibility is linked to increased distress associated with intrusive thoughts (Parrish and Radomsky, 2010), participants were expected to evaluate intrusive thoughts more negatively if experienced by the self than if reported by another in the high frequency condition, as the high frequency condition has been shown to be considered more meaningful (Corcoran and Woody, 2008). Corcoran and Woody found conflicting results in terms of which taboo thought was the most distressing to participants, and therefore, we did not have a specific hypothesis for which would be interpreted the most negatively. Corcoran and Woody did, however, find across both of their studies that the blasphemous thought was seen in the least negative light. As a result, we expected to find the least negative appraisals for the blasphemous thought. Consistent with Corcoran and Woody, we also expected appraisals of significance of the thoughts to be stronger for individuals with higher OC related beliefs. As individuals with OCD adopt unhelpful strategies to deal

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