

# fact sheet

## INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS: WHAT ARE THEY, AND HOW DO WE DEAL WITH THEM?



Intrusive Thoughts 13.7.21

Research suggests that more than 80% of expectant and new parents experience intrusive thoughts from time to time. The often overwhelming, exhausting nature of early parenthood means scary and intrusive thoughts are particularly common.

Intrusive thoughts are images, thoughts or impulses that are negative, unwanted, and often upsetting. They can happen at any time and be fleeting or more consistent. The intensity of the thoughts can be mild or more unbearable. The nature of them can be violent, sexual and/or disturbing. Among new parents, these thoughts can relate to harming or witnessing harm to their baby or others. For example: "what if I drown my baby in the bath", or "what if they never wake up from their sleep".

Having an intrusive thought does not mean the person will act on it. The thoughts or impulses are often inconsistent with who they normally are; they make no sense and are totally out of character. The distress is clinically relevant – a strong indicator that these thoughts are driven by anxiety and nothing more serious. People experiencing these thoughts often feel confused, ashamed and guilty for having them.

Health professionals who understand perinatal-related intrusive thoughts know they are just thoughts. They know they are usually a sign of overwhelm and increased anxiety, and there is no need to worry that this expectant or new parent will act on them.

When anxiety levels become elevated it causes uncomfortable symptoms like scary thoughts, and they are NOT usually an indicator of psychosis. They may make expectant and new parents feel like they are going crazy, but they are not.

In more severe cases, intrusive thoughts may suggest a parent is suffering from perinatal depression and anxiety. More persistent, obsessive thoughts could be a sign of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It is recommended to seek

professional support if any of the above is being experienced by you or someone close to you.

### TIPS FOR DEALING WITH INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS:

- When an intrusive thought arises, label it as an 'intrusive thought'.
- Know that you can try to work out how much attention you pay to it and then how you respond to that thought.
- Remind yourself that it is NOT about who you are, it's just a symptom of anxiety.
- Remember that intrusive thoughts are unprompted and uncontrollable. We get countless amounts of thoughts every day, but because they are distressing, we pay more attention to them, which in turn makes them more powerful.
- Accept the intrusive thought. Try not to push it away.
- Allow time for it to pass.
- Expect thoughts to return, notice them and reassure yourself that they are only thoughts and will pass.
- Distract yourself if they become too much with another task, walk in fresh air or read a book or watch TV.
- Keep your brain busy with other activities e.g. puzzles/music and steer it in another direction.
- If possible, continue moving through the day's activities, allowing anxiety to co-exist.
- Getting validation of the distress, reassurance about what they are and educating yourself about intrusive thoughts can also help.
- Seek social support. Talking about these thoughts can offer some relief from the ruminations.
- Join a helpful virtual support parents group such as 'Gidget Virtual Village'. →



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Gidget Foundation Australia exists to support the emotional wellbeing of expectant and new parents to ensure they receive timely, appropriate and specialist care.

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**“You can be scared and still take care of your baby.**

**You can be uncertain and still do things that help you feel more in control.**

**You can have scary thoughts and be a wonderful mother.**

**You can be anxious beyond belief and still experience joy.”**

(Karen Kleiman, MSW. Founder and Director, The Postpartum Stress Centre)

If more specialised professional help is needed, Gidget Foundation Australia offers free ongoing specialist counselling to expectant and new parents. Please contact Gidget Foundation Australia at 1300 851 758 or [contact@gidgethouse.org.au](mailto:contact@gidgethouse.org.au) for more information.

- If you feel that your thoughts are out of your control or that you cannot manage them, contact your healthcare provider immediately or call 000.
- If at any time you feel you or your baby are not safe, please call 000 or have someone take you to an emergency room.
- If you have been told that your thoughts are worrisome to others, but they seem real to you, or you feel that your thoughts make sense, where others' do not, let someone close to you know how you are feeling and tell them it's an emergency. 🌸



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