

“Why Can’t You Just Stop Thinking About It?”

By Michelle Witkin, Ph.D.



A little while ago, I took a walk in a park that was along the cliffs of the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The day was clear and the view was beautiful. Except one thing kept popping up that disrupted my serenity. It was a sign that read, "DANGEROUS CONDITION. DO NOT CLIMB ON OR OVER RAILING. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!"

"Gee, thanks," I thought to myself. I looked to my companion. "You know, I wasn't even thinking about climbing over the railing and now I can't get it out of my head."

Indeed, my companion was having images of climbing on or over the railing, as well. As if one warning weren't enough, this same message was repeated on signs all along the cliff's edge. They were far enough apart so that, just as the image began to fade, we were admonished once again to "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!"

"That sign is an OCD sufferer's nightmare," I commented.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is intrusive thoughts and images. They are unwanted by the person, they cause distress and they won't go away. What's more, they play themselves over and over in the person's head. It is these thoughts that make up the "Obsessive" part of OCD.

"Why Can't You Just Stop Thinking About It?"

These are the words that many OCD sufferers hear from their well-meaning friends and loved ones - that is, if they are courageous enough to actually share that they are having unwanted, intrusive thoughts. In fact, most people with OCD will tell you that they *already have* tried to stop thinking about it. They may have put great effort into trying to make the offending thoughts and images go away. So often, though, it seems that the harder they try, the stronger the thoughts. How can this be?

Well, the sign I spoke of above is a good illustration of why it is difficult (if not impossible) to just stop thinking about something. Imagine it is you walking along the railing and the sign warns you, "DANGEROUS CONDITION. DO NOT CLIMB ON OR OVER RAILING. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!" Now, try it. Don't even think about climbing over the railing. Whatever you do, do not think about climbing on or over the railing. You're not thinking about it, right? Do not think about climbing over or on the railing!

If you had images in your head of climbing on or over a railing, you are not alone. Our mind works so that when we struggle to try NOT to think about something, we tend to only think about it more. I will sometimes challenge people in my practice not to think about a white rabbit. Usually, they immediately begin to smile. That's because they get it. That white rabbit popped into their head as soon as I said anything about it - and they realize the futility of trying to not think about it.

So, why can't the person with OCD just stop thinking about an unwanted thought or image? Because our minds just do not work that way. It seems that we may do better if we simply do not try to fight away those unwanted thoughts, and instead go with them. We may just find that, when we do not fight with those thoughts, they begin to fade away on their own.

If someone in your life is struggling with OCD, remember that they cannot simply stop thinking about their intrusive thoughts and make them go away. There is, however, real help for managing these thoughts. Your support and understanding about how very difficult it is to get unwanted thoughts out of their head may be that person's first step toward getting help and moving in a positive direction.