



Intrusive Memories

Intrusive memories can be experienced in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive images. These memories lack the awareness that they are something from the past, and are instead experienced as some kind of threat in the present. There is a “nowness” with intrusive memories and they have been identified by some as “warning signal intrusion” (Ehlers, Hackman, & Michael, 2004). The belief is that intrusive memories are not random nor are they the most traumatic memories of the survivor. Instead, intrusive memories are memories that let the person know that something bad is going to happen. So these memories could be identified as having functional significance, as they serve as a way to warn for future trauma events as well as function as a signal when the situation/symptoms may become worse.

Intrusive memories are generally triggered by one of the five senses:

- vision
- hearing
- smell
- taste
- touch

Intrusive memories are as intensely experienced by the person as they were experienced during the actual trauma event, with the autonomic nervous system being activated. For some this includes faster respiration, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, dilated pupils, pale skin color, and decreased digestion (for possible fight, flight or freeze response). Intrusive memories are generally experienced through short, vivid sensory fragments such as visual images, taste, smell, sound, or bodily sensation (Ehlers et al, 2002). According to Ehlers et al (2002), research has shown that visual images are the most common intrusion across traumatic events, not bodily sensation such as pain. Intrusive memories are distressing because they are experienced as they were experienced during the traumatic event (in the nowness) because they are unpredictable.

Some people recover spontaneously from intrusive memories. For those who do not recover, however, they can find help through counseling. More specifically, counseling may help diminish the frequency, vividness, and distress of the intrusive memories and gradually help them fade away. Counseling often involves reconstructing the traumatic event and helping to put memories in the context of time and place - an important goal for survivors. The survivor also learns to discriminate between the “then” (context of trauma) and “now” (present context/harmless trigger).

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