



# POSTPARTUM HARM THOUGHTS

Perinatal Anxiety Research Lab

[parlab.med.ubc.ca](http://parlab.med.ubc.ca)

# WE HAVE LOTS OF THOUGHTS ALL THE TIME



**SOME THINGS WE CHOOSE  
TO THINK ABOUT**



**SOME THOUGHTS JUST "POP"  
INTO OUR HEADS**

● **OUR THOUGHTS CAN BE...** ●



**IMAGES**



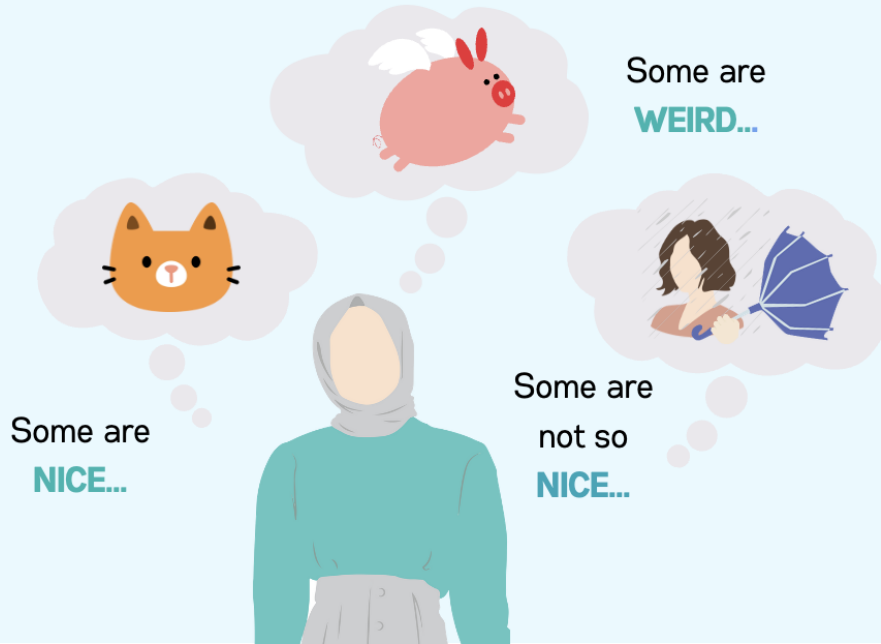
**WORDS**



**URGES**

# WE HAVE MANY KINDS OF

T H O U G H T S



# WHAT ABOUT THE ONES I DON'T LIKE?



Some of our thoughts are **unpleasant** and we don't want them!



They can be about all sorts of things we find **unpleasant** or **upsetting**

A thought that comes into your mind when you don't want it to is an **INTRUSIVE THOUGHT**



Any thought can feel **intrusive** if it happens when we don't want it to!

# WHY DO I THINK THE THINGS I THINK?

We're more likely to think about the things we're **worried** about...

Intrusive thoughts are more **common** when we're **stressed out!**



# DO I NOTICE ALL MY INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS?

**NOPE!**

## The ones I ignore

- The thought is kind of **BORING**
- It doesn't apply to **ME**
- It's nice but **NOT A BIG DEAL**
- It's a part of the **ENVIRONMENT**



## The ones I pay attention to

- ✓ It's really **UPSETTING**
- ✓ It's about **ME**
- ✓ It makes me think **I'M A BAD PERSON**
- ✓ This could **REALLY HAPPEN!**



# WHY ARE SOME INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS OPPOSITE OF WHAT I WANT?

We are more likely to pay attention to intrusive thoughts about things we don't want to happen!



What if my baby gets sick



Saying your ex's name with your wedding vows



Swearing at your boss



# WHO EXPERIENCES WHICH THOUGHTS



# WHAT ABOUT NEW MOMS



New moms think about their baby **ALL THE TIME!**



New moms want their babies to be really safe



New moms think about danger **A LOT!**



**AND...**

New moms experience **UNWANTED, INTRUSIVE** thoughts about their baby



# MOST NEW MOMS HAVE THOUGHTS ABOUT HARM COMING TO THEIR BABY



## ACCIDENTAL HARM

What if I drop my baby?

What if my baby suffocates in her sleep?

What if I get distracted and she drowns in the bath?



## INTENTIONAL HARM

I could puncture the soft spot on my baby's head!

I could throw my baby off the balcony!

What if I sexually abuse my baby?

I could cut my baby with a kitchen knife!



# HOW COMMON ARE NEW MOTHERS' THOUGHTS OF INFANT-RELATED HARM?



**100%**

of new mothers report **unwanted, intrusive** thoughts of harming their baby

**BY ACCIDENT**



**50%**

of new mothers report **unwanted, intrusive** thoughts of harming their baby

**ON PURPOSE**



## WHY DO PARENTS HAVE THESE KINDS OF THOUGHTS?



We don't exactly know why, but we think it may be related to our evolution...



People have likely evolved to be hyper-alert to sources of danger when they are new parents



Harm thoughts help us stay alert!

# DO DADS HAVE THESE THOUGHTS TOO?

Compared to moms, dads...



Experience these thoughts less often



Find them less upsetting



Can find them more difficult to talk about

# PARENTS DON'T ACT ON THEIR UNWANTED, INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS, IMAGES OR IMPULSES..

There is no evidence that moms act on their **UNWANTED, INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS, IMAGES** or **IMPULSES** - **even violent ones!**



This mom has thoughts about hurting their baby on **PURPOSE**

The mom on the left is no more likely to harm their infant than the mom on the right!



This mom has thoughts about hurting their baby **BY ACCIDENT**

# ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT WORRIED I'LL HURT MY BABY?



I'm having **unwanted, intrusive** thoughts about hurting my baby

Nope!



I'm scared I might act on my **unwanted, intrusive** thoughts about my baby

Nope!



I have OCD and my obsessions are about harming my baby

Nope!

# IS IT NORMAL TO BE UPSET ABOUT THESE THOUGHTS?



Thoughts of harming your infant can be very upsetting and distressing



**YES!**



Unwanted, intrusive thoughts of hurting your baby on purpose tend to be the most upsetting

## SO, WHY DO SOME MOMS HURT THEIR BABIES?

Even though it's **REALLY RARE**, some mothers do hurt their babies.



When a new mom hurts their baby, it's usually because they are struggling with serious mental health difficulties or are very alone and unsupported.

If you are experiencing mental health difficulties, or are struggling in other ways (even if you think you are not at risk of harming your baby) it can be really helpful to talk to someone about what you're going through.

**IF YOU INTERPRET THE FACT THAT YOU ARE HAVING THESE  
THOUGHTS, OR THE CONTENT OF YOUR THOUGHTS TO  
MEAN....**

**I'M CRAZY**

**I'M A DANGER  
TO MY BABY**

**I'M A BAD  
PERSON**

**....your unwanted intrusive thoughts may be very distressing and keep popping up.**

**This can be part of a problem known as  
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**



# WHAT IS OCD?

OCD IS AN ANXIETY-RELATED DISORDER WITH 2 MAIN FEATURES



## OBSSESSIONS

Recurrent, unwanted intrusive thoughts that are often upsetting



## COMPULSIONS

Things you do over and over again to help you feel better about your obsessions

## COMPULSIONS

**Checking:** Checking if my baby is breathing

**Reassurance seeking:** Asking my partner if they think our baby is healthy

**Washing:** Washing my baby's things over and over to make sure they're clean



## OBSESSIONS

**Image:** Stepping on my baby

**Thought:** What if I shove my baby

**Impulse:** To scream at my baby



# WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PERINATAL OCD?



OCD appears most common during the postpartum period



OCD is more common during pregnancy and the postpartum



Obsessions in perinatal OCD often involve the infant



Obsessions of harm towards the infant are common



17%

of pregnant and postpartum women will experience perinatal OCD



# HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE OCD?



1

**OBSESSIONS** and **COMPULSIONS** take over an hour a day



2

Your OCD symptoms are really upsetting to you



3

Your OCD is making it really difficult for you to manage your life

● **The obsessions and compulsions are making it difficult to manage** ●



Your relationship



Caring for your baby



Your work



Your day to day tasks

# WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY OCD?



**Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** is the most effective form of therapy for OCD



There is now evidence that **CBT is effective for perinatal OCD**



Often it is a **psychologist** who provides CBT



CBT will focus on how you are **interpreting** your obsessions and what you are **doing** about them



# WHY DIDN'T ANYONE TELL ME?



Someone should have told you - really!



The problem is most people don't know...



Everyone should know about this..

# RESOURCES



## Maternal OCD



[maternalocd.org](https://maternalocd.org)



@maternalocd



[info@maternalocd.org](mailto:info@maternalocd.org)



## OCD Action



<https://ocdaction.org.uk>



@ocdaction



[info@ocdaction.org.uk](mailto:info@ocdaction.org.uk)



Helpline: 0300 636 5478



## Anxiety Canada



[anxietycanada.com](https://anxietycanada.com)



@Anxiety\_Canada



[info@anxietycanada.com](mailto:info@anxietycanada.com)



## Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia



[panda.org.au](https://panda.org.au)



@PANDAaustralia



[info@panda.org.au](mailto:info@panda.org.au)



Helpline: 1300 726 306

# MEET THE TEAM



**Dr. Nichole Fairbrother**

Director of the Perinatal Anxiety Research Lab,  
Registered Psychologist and Clinical Associate Professor  
Department of Psychology  
University of British Columbia



**Dr. Alissa Antle**

Professor and Director of Tangible Embodied and  
Child Interaction (TECI) Research Lab,  
School of Interactive Arts & Technology  
Simon Fraser University, Royal Society of Canada  
College of New Scholars, Distinguished Researcher  
Faculty of Communication Art & Technology



**Dr. Jon Abramowitz**

Professor of Psychology,  
Clinical Psychology Program,  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Clinical Psychologist



**Dr. Fiona Challacombe**

Clinical Psychologist  
NIHR Clinical Lecturer, Kings College London  
South London & Maudsley NHS Trust



**Maria Bavetta**

Patient Partner & Co-founder  
Maternal OCD



**Diana Wilson**

Patient Partner & Co-founder  
Maternal OCD



**Cora Keeney**

Manager, Perinatal Anxiety  
Research Lab (PARLab)  
University of British Columbia



**Laura Hernandez**

Infographic designer

## UBC PERINATAL ANXIETY LAB



[www.instagram.com/parlab.med/](http://www.instagram.com/parlab.med/)



[www.twitter.com/par\\_lab](http://www.twitter.com/par_lab)



[www.facebook.com/ubcPARlab](http://www.facebook.com/ubcPARlab)



[www.parlab.med.ubc.ca](http://www.parlab.med.ubc.ca)