

MindSpeak Essay Competition

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Intrusive Thoughts: How Social Media Misconstrued Youth Mental Health Discourse

We all have a voice inside our heads, an internal monologue. Some say it's the sound of our own subconscious, others refer to it as soul or intuition. This voice is typically so quiet, it's almost indiscernible.

But I have single handedly corrupted my own subconscious.

My brain is filled with intruders, robbers who visit my brain without any prior warning or consent. These robbers steal every inch of compassionate humanity within myself and replace it with thoughts of violent, erratic behavior. Every thought of violence and disturbing fantasies cement themselves in my brain, filling in craters with no way to remove them.

I lose control.

I feel helpless.

I *am* helpless.

I find myself frequently immersed with these invaders and the intrusive thoughts they carry with them. It's not like I want them there. I never invite these intruders in, do I? But they refuse to quit. They never leave. They cling to me like all of my bad habits, sticking like glue as I try to shake them off. Those intrusive thoughts, the dark and menacing whispers casually telling me, "Hey, what if you just killed your family?" crawl their way into every crevice of my mind.

They're just...

Dirty.

I feel dirty.

Ashamed.

Am I harboring a dark secret?

No matter how many times I call the police in my brain about these robbers, my humanity and empathy is never returned to its rightful place. And no matter how many times I tell myself others may contain robbers too, I never truly believe it. Because, how can I? My intrusive thoughts aren't like the ones I see on social media. My brain invaders aren't the ones other people my age seem to have, no. When I open TikTok, the first video I see is of a boy my age touching a dirty street pole and captioning it:

"My *intrusive thoughts* won".

I go to dance and a girl does a cartwheel randomly, apologizes and says:

"My *intrusive thoughts* won".

I sit down in the cafeteria at school, and my friend impulsively says she wants to shave all her hair off. Why?

"Oh, it was just an *intrusive thought*."

If this is what true intrusive thoughts are, then maybe I am a freak. Because I cannot let *my* intrusive thoughts win, can I? What happens if *my* intrusive thoughts win?

I will murder my entire family.

I will turn into a vocal racist who supports white supremacy.

I will kill myself, leaving my battered, bloody body for my friends and family to find.

Yet, how can *#intrusivethoughts*, a hashtag with more than 796 million views, corrupt youth brains like myself? How can misinformation spread so rapidly? Why does social media glamorize the worst of human experience?

Intrusive thoughts like the ones that invade my mind, on social media, are watered down into cute little quirks of human life, edgy badges of honor all humans have. Algorithms push the notion that we can just throw these serious and all encompassing symptoms carelessly, as if robots know what it's like to battle intrusive thoughts tirelessly, day in and day out.

Social media has made youth numb to the gravity of these thoughts. It has turned the dangerous and potentially life ending issue of intrusive thoughts into simple, frivolous matters. Intrusive thoughts are not whimsical butterflies that graciously land on the petals of our mind, only to flutter away if we act on it, it is quite the contrary. They are invaders, intruding on the homes of our minds when we least expect it.

When it comes to intrusive thoughts, we as a society cannot afford to treat them lightly. We cannot afford to make intrusive thoughts *trendy*, trivial, and shallow. My intrusive thoughts control my life, sometimes strip me of my sanity, and take me to a place of no return. It is our responsibility to treat these thoughts with the weight they deserve. Because of misinformation and its corruption of our youth, deconstructing the convoluted mindset many young people have surrounding intrusive thoughts and their prevalence is absolutely necessary.

But how?

I now know I am not the only one who contains intrusive thoughts and their never-ending plague. Yet, do others? Peer support networks in education spaces can be established, so young people like myself can connect and support one another. Guidance counselors in school can lead this program, first describing the true nature of intrusive thoughts and their detrimental effects. A key part of this approach is giving young people practical and real strategies for managing intrusive thoughts. Schools have a unique opportunity to cultivate these communities, as by introducing the topic in a sensitive and non-judgmental way, an entire institution can open up

dialogue surrounding intrusive thoughts, and mental health as a whole. True education about the severity of intrusive thoughts will break down this pesky misinformation, raise awareness, and give youth like myself toiling with intrusive thoughts the space and strategies to manage them.

And who knows?

Maybe one day, the robbers in my brain will one day restore the full humanity within me.