Intrusive Thoughts & Traumatic Reminders

Often when children have experienced overwhelming, upsetting events they have a hard time not thinking about them. Even when they try their best not to think about the frightening event, upsetting memories may pop into their minds at any time. When this occurs, it may feel as upsetting as when the event happened. Re-experiencing awful feelings, thoughts or memories is never pleasant, but it is worse when these thoughts seem to appear out of the blue. One way of taking control again is to figure out what triggers the thoughts and images connected to the situation that was so originally overwhelming. There are often things that we are not even aware of that trigger the memories and frightening images and feelings of the events. Learning what those triggers/reminders are is the first step to taking back control over how children feel.

Before dealing with your child’s struggles with intrusive thoughts, make sure that you are feeling calm and able to listen patiently as you and your child try to figure out the times or situations when traumatic memories and experiences re-appear.

Identify Triggers or Traumatic Reminders

If your child seems to get stirred up or especially nervous at particular times, try to help them think about what they did, saw, smelled or felt before they felt this way.

- Are there specific times of day when the images or feelings emerge?
- Do the memories pop up around particular people or places?
- Are there smells, sights or sounds that come up at around the time that memories re-emerge
- Do the memories pop-up when your child is talking about certain topics, listening to certain types of discussions, listening to certain stories, or watching certain types of TV shows, etc.

Replace Intrusive Thoughts with Happier Ones

Help your child actively replace upsetting thoughts connected with the trauma with a positive thought or memory, one that is connected to pleasure and success—For example, help your child imagine a special moment like scoring a goal, getting a good grade, or a walk on the beach or in a park. Help them get a firm image in their mind. They may use a brief scene or a longer scene such as driving to the beach and setting up on so on.

While doing this is often helpful to practice the focused, slow breathing exercise (see below).

Revised 3/11/11
USE SENSORY STIMULATION TO BRING YOUR CHILD BACK TO THE PRESENT

Often, it seems clear to you that your child is experiencing intrusive thoughts or memories about the event and they are unable, or too scared, to discuss them with you. They may seem withdrawn, spaced out or quietly agitated. If this occurs, use the following “sensory stimulation” ideas to bring your child back to the present:

RUB THEIR SHOULDERS OR BACK

Touching can help your child reorient themselves to what is happening right at the moment, as opposed to the upsetting things that they are remembering and that happened in the past. However, for some children, an unexpected touch can be startling and upsetting, especially if they have been assaulted or abused. So, make sure that you have talked to them about trying this before you start.

OFFER THEM A HOT OR COLD DRINK

The taste, smell and soothing feeling can help reorient them to the present and to something pleasant.

HAVE THEM SMELL SOMETHING THEY LIKE

For example, smells of a favorite food, perfume or soap can help bring them back to the present and more pleasurable sensations.

PRACTICE FOCUSED BREATHING

When your child is having an intrusive thought or memory and is noticeably anxious, you can help them regain control by doing the focused breathing exercise. For example, you can say “I want you to take a slow focused breath with me and let it out very slowly….that’s it. Now breathe in and out with me…nice and slow….”

REMEMBER:

BE AWARE OF HOW YOU ARE FEELING

If you are upset, angry or distressed, make sure that you can respond to your child in a calm supportive manner before interacting with him or her. It is better not to get involved at that moment if you will likely act annoyed or irritable.

REMINDD CHILD OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEIR BEHAVIOR AND FEELINGS’

which are brought up by the event, as discussed in meetings with clinician.

MAINTAIN ROUTINES

Keep routines that existed before the traumatic events as a way of supporting order and predictability in your child’s world.