Dear Alice,

Sometimes I think what it would be like to be with a man, romantically. I am a single woman, and have never had any relationships. Sometimes, though, when I am imagining what it could be like, it turns violent on me, in my mind, and I always end up being raped. This makes me apprehensive and scared of ever becoming involved with anyone. I am scared that everyone I meet will do this to me. I think that it wouldn't be too bad to be single for the rest of my life, but I want to be loved, to be held. What do you think?

?Frightened mind

Answer

Dear Frightened mind,

It must be scary to have these recurring thoughts and images associated with intimacy. It is brave of you to submit such a question, especially because it is surely one that many readers have. Many people have fears of sexual assault that interfere with their intimate relationships and many others also have recurring thoughts or worries about rape that can make other aspects of life difficult, as well. It may be helpful to explore some of the roots of these experiences and some strategies for dealing with them.

A person's past experience with sexual assault, harassment, or abuse may be one factor that contributes to persistent fears about rape. Far too many women have the experience of being cat-called or sexually harassed, for example. Many people have experiences in which their boundaries were crossed by a sexual partner. Unfortunately, many men and women have experienced sexual abuse, as well. Sexual abuse can include any of these things and experiencing or witnessing a sexual violation of any sort can prime a person to have fears about such violations occurring again.

Other people have such recurring images and fears even though they have never experienced a sexual assault of any sort. Whatever the source of these recurring thoughts, they are made all the more persistent by attempts to suppress them. Why do efforts to suppress thoughts have the opposite affect of making them all the more relentless?

Try not to think of an orange.

What happened? Did an image of an orange pop into your head? Active suppression of a
thought, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, requires putting energy into the thought itself in order to make it go away. So quite frequently, trying to suppress thoughts only serves to bring about more of the same thought. Often times, thoughts that accompany emotions such as guilt and fear can be the toughest to suppress because the desire to avoid the unpleasant emotions is high, so the amount of energy put into them is also high.

Many also think there may be neurological basis for intrusive thoughts, as well. Whatever the causes of these images or fears that you have, seeing a counselor may be useful to you. Therapy may be helpful in gaining insight into the root causes of the fear. More importantly, it may help to alleviate some of the intrusive thinking, or at the very least, give you some additional tools to work through it. You say you have never been in a relationship. Have you ever gone on dates? If so, were there specific points where you felt unsafe on those dates? Was there something that triggered the fear? How have you dealt with it when it comes up? Exploring these questions and many others with a supportive therapist may be the best way to address such thoughts.

In addition to therapy, taking some concrete steps to increase feelings of safety may be a good option. Consider these options: taking self-defense classes, only meeting a potential date in public places, going on double dates with friends you trust, and telling a friend where you'll be in case something happens. For more tips on safety and for information on self-defense classes, check out Safety in the city... and everywhere else [2].

Take care,

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health [3]
Miscellaneous [4]
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Related questions

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Talking about traumatic events [8]
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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [12]

Published date:
Dec 01, 1993
Last reviewed on:
Apr 03, 2015
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