

LIVING — WITH — OCD

TRIUMPH OVER
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS,
OBSESSIVE THOUGHTS,
COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOURS

CROSS BORDER BOOKS



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Living With OCD

*Triumph Over Negative
Emotions, Obsessive Thoughts,
and Compulsive Behaviors*

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Introduction

I think it's really important to take the stigma away from mental health... My brain and my heart are really important to me. I don't know why I wouldn't seek help to have those things be as healthy as my teeth. –Kerry Washington

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is defined as “a disorder in which a person has recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas, or sensations (obsessions) that make them feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions) (American Psychiatry Association. 2022).

This definition, however, doesn't feel fitting for a condition that can evolve from small compulsive behaviors to actions that are repeated so often that they consume your life. OCD can so significantly affect you that it may result in self-harm, and, for most people suffering from the disorder, depression is almost inevitable.

People will live with repetitive thoughts and behaviors naturally every day, and while these thoughts may be distressing for some, most do not have thoughts that disrupt their social interactions or halt their life.

OCD is all-consuming and the thoughts associated with the condition enforce rigid behaviors, some of which cause extreme emotional, and sometimes, physical pain. When you have OCD, you are compelled to perform these behaviors and when OCD thoughts are present, it can feel like it is near impossible to disengage from performing the actions required to dull the thoughts that are racing and repeating within your mind.

OCD is a complex beast though and studies are ongoing as to what triggers the condition and what types of OCD exist, and what the symptoms are of each of these types of compulsive behaviors. Recent research has shown that there may be a genetic component to the condition and promising genetic studies may hold the key to early diagnosis and treatment (Lin et al., 2022).

What is known from research and global studies is that OCD affects between 2 and 3% of people in the United States (USA) and approximately 2% of the global population. This means there are a staggering 78 million people around the world suffering from a debilitating and life-altering condition.

Most people will only seek a diagnosis when the condition threatens to, or has, ended their life as they knew it, and more yet, will not seek treatment at all due to the stigma that surrounds mental health.

It seems astonishing that in today's day and age, the general population would still regard mental health issues as something to be seen as a weakness. I always liken mental health disabilities to any other and for those living with OCD, or any other mental health issue for that matter, I applaud you.

I would like you to take a moment to reflect upon a moment in your life in which you admired a person with a physical, visible disability. This person may be a competitor in the Special Olympics, a war veteran, an accident survivor, or simply an inspirational clip you have seen floating around the internet. Think about how you felt. Did you connect with them as they went through their suffering? Did you admire them when they made the decision to change their circumstances or fight for

normality? Did you cheer for them or stand in awe as they regained their power and their momentum in life?

Why then does the world not accept an unseen disability, or regard a disability of the mind to be a weakness? It is, in fact, a strength, and it takes courage every single moment of every single day to get up and face the world despite the thought process within your mind and your body's physical reaction to these thoughts.

And this leads me to why I chose to write this book. It is not only to celebrate your strength and reliance as a person who has OCD, or as a person who loves or cares about someone with OCD. I wanted to share with you that there is hope and that with small steps, you can regain control of your mind and life once more.

The illusion that there are people who have it all together; who have overcome all of their issues, and who are beacons of light, completely problem free, is just that—an illusion. We all have our issues, damage from the past, illnesses, or pain we carry with us. We all have our cross to bear, it's how we spread the load that differs.

I am not, by any means, saying it will be easy—in fact, it will feel totally impossible at stages, but you have a distinct advantage. You already have the strength, the willpower, and the sheer tenacity to drive yourself through to the other side of your condition. The only components that are missing from your success formula are knowledge and for you to action this knowledge.

Living With OCD has been designed for you to not only find the right resources but to provide you with the practical, working knowledge you will need to manage your condition. OCD

cannot be cured, and I am certainly not claiming that this book will do that for you. My aim, though, is for you to stop seeing OCD as the monster lurking in a corner waiting to consume your life. Rather, I would love for you to learn to live with it and to see yourself as the resilient, powerful person that you are.

OCD can be managed, it doesn't need to be a dark cloud that follows you everywhere, ruining your goals or your future.

Through scientifically backed research and actionable daily behaviors you, the reader will be able to gain a deeper insight into OCD and what drives their actions and thoughts. And, while it is important to acknowledge that OCD is a serious condition, it is possible to live a healthy, balanced life. Through behavioral therapy and personal dedication, almost anyone can learn to manage the symptoms of OCD and become a functional, fully engaged participant in their own life.

The point of any treatment, for any illness or disability, is to get you back on your feet, so to speak, and it is my sincere hope that in reading this book is that you can, and that you will free yourself from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Chapter 1: Understanding Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Mental health problems don't define who you are. They are something you experience. You walk in the rain and you feel the rain, but, importantly, YOU ARE NOT THE RAIN. —Matt Haig

OCD affects approximately 1 in 40 adults and 1 in 100 children in the United States alone (Anxiety and Depression Organization of America. 2018), and is characterized by obsessive thoughts that result in compulsive behaviors.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder affects men, women, and children, although women are marginally more likely to be diagnosed with the condition. This does not, however, mean that more women than men suffer from OCD, just that more women seek a diagnosis and treatment (National Institute of Mental Health. 2022). Mental wellness institutes estimate that these diagnosis statistics are skewed because men still carry the weight of mental illness stigma more than women do.

A small percentage of the population will experience early onset of OCD, usually as a result of trauma but, for most people, the condition becomes very prevalent around the age of 18.

OCD can be distressing and can be the catalyst to other mental health issues like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

What Is OCD?

OCD is a mental illness. It does not discriminate and can affect people from every demographic.

Most people will go through cycles of obsession and compulsions as a way to self-soothe while experiencing stressful or traumatic events, but these cycles are not lasting and will not be repeatedly triggered.

For those of us who have OCD, though, episodes of the illness can last for very long periods of time, and the compulsions we experience often overtake our lives.

The term OCD is thrown around quite a lot in modern society and this can make OCD sufferers feel like what they are experiencing is irrelevant which, in itself, can trigger episodes of obsession.

OCD, however, is not a temporary condition, nor does it resolve itself, and when you have OCD your mind is plagued with intrusive thoughts, unwanted images, and intense upsetting feelings.

In a bid to soothe or rid yourself of these thoughts, a pattern of compulsive behaviors will form, and sadly, the compulsive actions performed because of your OCD will only temporarily, and sometimes fleetingly, rid you of those intrusive thoughts.

For you to be diagnosed with OCD, the cycle of obsession and compulsion must be extreme, must last for an extended period of time, and must be cyclic in nature. Your compulsion will consume a large period of time in your day, and your therapist will ascertain whether or not your condition is comorbid with

other mental health issues that may be triggering your compulsions.

What Are Obsessions and How Are They Formed?

Obsessions are the images, thoughts, impulses, and feelings that are experienced when suffering from OCD, and can feel like they are completely out of control when you are experiencing them.

When you are experiencing obsessions, you will most likely be fully aware of the damage your thoughts are causing and you will not want to have these thoughts or feelings but they will feel like they constantly bombard you, never giving you respite.

Many of us have deep feelings of guilt or shame when we experience our obsessions and the images associated with our thoughts and these can lead us to feel anxious and incredibly disturbed.

That doesn't mean that we don't know that what is going on in our mind is nonsensical, but the reality is that obsession go hand-in-hand with deep feelings of disgust, fear, and even self-doubt.

I would like to put your mind at ease and let you know that it is completely normal to have disturbing thoughts from time to time—the only difference is that those without OCD have the privilege of their thoughts being fleeting.

Obsession might look the same for non-OCD sufferers but it is vitally important that, if you are reading this book, and you do not have OCD, you are sensitive to the fact that obsession and being obsessed are two very different things.

And if you do have OCD, or suspect you have OCD, know you are not crazy nor are you trapped in this existence forever.

I know, and so should you, that your thoughts are not who you are, and that they are not a reflection of your values and morals.

Obsessions Come in Different Types

OCD obsessions can be categorized and characterized but this doesn't mean you will have only one type of obsession.

You may find that your obsessions cycle between certain categories and may take on different characteristics from other categories.

Try not to get bogged down in the details, though. Rather, take a look at the tables below and mark off which of these categories and characteristics apply to you.

Category	Characteristics	Check Box
Contamination obsessions are very common and involve a fear of coming into contact with, or being the source of contamination of germs or dirt. Contamination obsession is scary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bodily fluids like sweat, blood, urine, feces, etc.• Diseases that are catastrophic (HIV, heart or organ diseases, etc) or non-catastrophic like a common cold, conjunctivitis, etc.	

<p>and can lead to extreme compulsions and debilitating fear.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contaminants related to the environment like pollution, asbestos, radiation, etc. ● Chemicals and solvents like household and mechanical cleaners. ● Dirt and dust. 	
<p>Sexual obsessions can have you feeling deep feelings of shame and disgust. They are the repetitive and unwanted thoughts and mental images relating to sex acts or fear of a specific sex act.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A fear of acting on a sexual thought or image or being the victim of a sexual thought or image. ● A fear of harming others, especially children as a result of a sexual thought or image. ● A fear of, or repetitive thoughts of violent sexual acts or behaviors towards other people including loved ones. 	

<p>Violent obsessions are also accompanied by extreme fear, guilt, and feelings of disgust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A fear of, or acting on the impulse of self-harming. ● A fear of, or acting on the impulse of harming others. ● A fear of, or acting on exposure to violent imagery or imaginary. 	
<p>Religious and moral obsessions are often fundamentalist in nature and can induce feelings of anxiety and fear that you have offended a deity and that there will be consequences or repercussions for unknowingly offending a god, or gods. Sometimes, we can fear becoming indoctrinated too, and this fear of indoctrination can cause panic when having to attend religious or spiritual ceremonies like</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A fear of damnation, blasphemy, or idolatry. ● A deep worry of offending a religious deity, god, or symbol (could be related to one or more religions). 	

weddings, funerals, etc.		
Responsibility obsessions are very common but can bring on panic attacks because we feel that we are socially, morally, or circumstantially responsible for harm caused to others or ourselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fear of being the cause of a tragic accident, a robbery, a fire, etc. • An intense fear of being responsible for harming others as a result of not taking responsibility, or not taking proper precautions to prevent an accident or incident. 	
Perfectionism obsessions are some of the most common OCD thoughts and can include an expectation of perfectionism of yourself, or the perfection of things around you. When you are having these obsessions, you may feel deep feelings of inadequacy which	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All-consuming thoughts of evenness, fairness, or exactness in yourself, home, place of business, etc. • A need to know everything or remember everything all of the time. • A deep fear of losing possessions 	

<p>drives you to try and control what is happening around you.</p>	<p>that may be needed, or of throwing something out that may be needed in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An obsession with performing acts and behaviors perfectly or correctly according to others. ● A paralyzing fear of making mistakes. 	
<p>Identity obsessions are those that have us wondering about our own sexuality, gender, or how others see our sexuality or gender. They may include a fear of someone who is of a different gender or sexuality too.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Obsessive thoughts of fitting in with specific gender identity norms or the perception that you don't fit within these norms. ● Thoughts and imagery of your own sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of others. 	

<p>Other obsessions. OCD is complex and obsessions and compulsions don't fit in a neatly packaged box. Other obsessions can occur together with or separately to those mentioned. This doesn't mean your OCD is untreatable or that you cannot free yourself from what you are experiencing though.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Relationship-based obsessions that could involve fidelity, morality, etc, and which extend to romantic, familial, work, and friendship relationships.● Thoughts and imagery related to death, life, or existence. This could include philosophies, religion, or purpose in life.● Memory recollection obsessions which revolve around true versus false statements. This may include time spent on replaying past events or trying to change a present outcome by recalling past events.● A deep fear of emotions,	
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	including your own and thoughts that surround ways in which you can avoid your own emotions or the emotions and feelings of others.	
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After the Obsession Come Compulsions

OCD compulsions occur as a result of the obsessions you may have and are the actions or reactions that are perpetuated in order to try and soothe or neutralize the thoughts you are having.

When we have compulsions we are almost always trying to make the obsession go away and while we know that the compulsion will only offer temporary relief, we still act upon them. Most of us have a deep sense of understanding that by not dealing with our thoughts we are only making our compulsions worse, but it's hard to speak about the things that we feel fearful, ashamed, or guilty of.

Our compulsions will often be far more time-consuming than the obsession and we will repeat the behaviors a number of times to try and extend the feeling of relief you feel when performing these actions.

So that you know, normal, daily repetitive behaviors are not compulsions, and going back to check you have switched off the

stove is not necessarily a compulsion. It is important to clearly define ritualistic behaviors like a bedtime routine, or morning schedule against compulsive behavior.

Rituals and positive habitual behaviors are beneficial to our life and often help us to live a more efficient and productive life. These behaviors may be accompanied by a fleeting thought or reminder to perform an action or no thought at all in the case of a habit.

Compulsive behavior, on the other hand, serves little purpose, is destructive, and wastes our time.

Let me put it to you this way, arranging, packing, and unpacking crockery 8 hours a day is not unhealthy if you work in a home goods store. Doing the same at home and missing a day's work is not healthy, though, and is compulsive behavior.

Another consideration with compulsive behavior is whether you are a stickler for details or whether the compulsion is dominating your life. Some people are just more naturally inclined to having order in their life.

A quick way to ascertain whether or not your compulsive behaviors are personality driven rather than OCD driven is to ask yourself, *would I prefer to live my life this way? or am I unhappy because I have to live this way?*

Answering these two questions honestly will go a long way in understanding whether or not your compulsions are coming from a place of positive growth in your life as opposed to trying to rid yourself of your thoughts and the anxiety surrounding them.

Types of Compulsion

Now that you know why you have compulsions, it is important to understand that like obsessions, compulsions can be both categorized and characterized.

Your compulsions, however, will probably not be combined with other compulsive behaviors because, by definition, they are the actions we do to try and soothe the feelings we have as a result of our thoughts.

Have a look at the table below and check off which of these compulsions you suffer from. You can even mark them on frequency and severity if you like.

Category	Characteristics	Check Box
Cleaning and washing compulsions are the behaviors we do to soothe our obsessions with contamination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Washing your hands, body, or a specific part of your body in a specific way, for a certain amount of time, or a specific number of times.• Performs bodily functions like teeth brushing, grooming, hair brushing, etc	

	<p>repeatedly to ensure it is done properly, to perfection, or that the behavior has been performed a certain number of times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cleaning the house, office, or surfaces over and over again to soothe thoughts of contamination. ● Repetitive cleaning behaviors to remove contaminants or ritualistically avoiding certain things to avoid contamination. 	
<p>Checking compulsions are those that have us checking to make sure we haven't caused harm, offense, or mistakes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compulsively checking that no harm has been done or that no harm could be done to others or yourself. ● Consistently checking that you 	

	<p>have not harmed yourself in some way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Checking that no accidents can happen or that nothing neglectful has been done to cause harm. ● Compulsively looking for ways that you could have made a mistake. ● Hyperfixation on a certain part of your body to ensure that it is in a good condition or that no harm has been caused. 	
<p>Mental compulsions can manifest externally or internally and shouldn't be confused with obsessions. For example, you may believe you have in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mentally preparing and reviewing circumstances in which you could cause harm, could become a victim to harm, or circumstances that may be dangerous. 	

<p>some way offended a god (the obsession) and would either pray in your mind or out loud repetitively (the compulsion).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Praying, or meditating over perceived harm caused or to prevent harm to others or to yourself. ● Counting internally, or externally, to prevent a mistake from being made or to ensure that a task is performed a certain number of times. ● Compulsive undoing, for example, trying to replace a bad act or behavior with a good one until you begin to feel free of guilt. 	
<p>Repetitive compulsions are the most common of compulsions and the only ones to be combined with</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reading or writing things multiple times or a certain number of times. ● Repeating activities over and over again 	

<p>other compulsive behaviors.</p>	<p>until the person feels satisfied.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Repetitive body movements like blinking, tapping, or stamping. ● Having to perform activities a certain amount of times, or in multiples. 	
<p>Not all compulsions fit into a category though and you may have other compulsions that accompany repetitive behavior. These are usually intuitive behaviors and have less to do with an actual conscious obsession and more to do with the subconscious need to self-soothe.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Putting objects in a certain order, or rearranging things over and over again until it feels right. ● Repeatedly seeking reassurance from others. ● Avoiding all situations that may trigger obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviors. 	

The 6 Cognitive Distortions

Science has shown that OCD is characterized by one or more errors in thought processes. These errors in thought are called cognitive distortions.

Now, not everyone who experiences cognitive distortions will have obsessions or compulsions.

In fact, some people will not be affected at all, while others will experience only some distortions that may result in other mental illnesses.

Cognitive distortions will create a bias in the way we see the world around us as well as how we see ourselves and will cause our perceptions to be skewed.

Before I carry on, I'd like to make one thing clear—perception is a person's reality but it is not necessarily fact. This means you could perceive danger when no danger is present and your mind will trigger a fear response from you.

Perception is your truth, and your mind perceiving these things does not make you “crazy” nor does it mean that you are trapped in your thoughts. The great thing about perception is that it can be changed because it is not fact, and with the techniques laid out in this book, you can change your perception by changing your thoughts.

When you suffer from OCD, specifically, you will have a number of distorted perceptions or cognitive distortions.

It is critical that you work with your therapists so that you not only identify these distortions, but seek to challenge them through questioning and reasoning.

The six primary distortions that OCD sufferers have are listed below and they're a great starting point for you to begin to challenge your perceptions.

1. An Over-Importance of Thoughts

Thought-action fusion is the technical term given for thought processes. Most people know that thought and action are separate functions, but for those with OCD, this thought-action process becomes confused. For example, you may believe that thinking about harming others is exactly the same as physically hurting someone. You could believe that by thinking a thought means you truly want to hurt a person and that this means you are a terrible person.

The reality is that thoughts are harmless if they are not acted on and if they are addressed correctly and not suppressed.

2. Overestimating Danger

The human fear response is biological and handed down to us as an evolutionary response to perceived danger. People who have OCD will often have a brain that overestimates danger, though, and as such, they will become caught up in a loop of trying to prevent error, mistakes, or the consequences of these mistakes.

An overestimation of danger is the direct cause of most compulsions and will have you excessively checking your behaviors and activities as well as repeating actions over

and over again to try and prevent yourself from entering into a fear response.

Fear, like thoughts, can be reframed, and when fear is reframed to excitement it can encourage positive action rather than destructive behaviors.

Of course, many of the fears we imagine are a possibility, but what is important is to weigh up the probability. For example, stepping into the road without first checking traffic correctly once or twice is dangerous and could likely result in harm, but the probability of an accident happening after checking for traffic once or twice is very minimal.

3. An Inflation of Responsibility

People who have OCD will often feel like they are responsible for outcomes they have no control over. This means you will ignore or discredit external circumstances and the action of others. An inflation of responsibility may start as something small that snowballs into exaggerated and unrealistic consequences.

If I leave two minutes late, I will be the cause of the company not meeting quota today.

When you examine the statement above, you can see that it's highly unlikely that a two-minute difference could cause such catastrophic results, but when you have OCD, the perception that your behavior will result in harm compels you to act on a compulsion.

Once again, challenging the outcome and the thought will go a long way to neutralize how we perceive the consequences of our actions, but for most who have OCD, compulsions overrule thought-challenging when training and treatment have not been established.

4. An Overestimation of Consequence

Most people are somewhat certain that with preparation and knowledge, they could overcome danger but for those with OCD, this is not true. When you have OCD, you can believe wholeheartedly that in a dangerous situation you will not be able to cope, regardless of how knowledgeable or prepared you may be.

OCD sufferers may also believe that encountering danger will mean that the result will always be one that is catastrophic. And, yes, certain consequences can lead to poor outcomes, but most consequences can be turned around with tenacity and a change in mindset.

Most people do weigh up the consequences of the actions they take, but most people never dwell on the worst-case scenarios or the “what ifs.” OCD can create the idea that mistakes are unacceptable and that they certainly will never be a chance for a new start.

5. A Need for Certainty

Feeling safe, or certainty, is a basic human need and ranks 2nd, only above physiological needs on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. It is, therefore, only natural that we

would prioritize our need for safety and certainty. When you have OCD, though, the need for certainty in every situation you encounter is not realistic.

This may lead you to seek out constant reassurance from the people you surround yourself with so that you can avoid feelings of fear or anxiety. Added to this, you may avoid any situation that triggers your fear response and this can cause you to withdraw from society and the people you love. Alternatively, you may push away those you love by overwhelming them with your requests for reassurance.

6. *Emotional Discomfort Intolerance*

People who have OCD have an irrational fear of either embarrassing themselves or of becoming insane if they experience or work through their negative emotions. As such, you may perpetuate compulsive behaviors as a way to either reassure yourself or to avoid having to acknowledge and deal with your own emotions. For those with OCD, not having to deal with, or even experience our negative emotions may become a priority over just about anything else.

The Causes of OCD

Science is not yet sure what causes OCD. Theories are circling around whether the condition develops over a combination of experience, personality, and genetics, or if only one of these factors could contribute to the illness.

Research suggests, however, that the factors involved in causing OCD are likely to be as a result of life experiences/trauma/upbringing, personality traits, and biological/genetic factors.

OCD may be still in the birth phases of research, but treatments when actioned are successful and can remarkably improve the quality of a person's life.

Let's have a look at these factors and how they may trigger OCD.

Personal Experiences/Trauma/Upbringing

Studies are being conducted into how a person experiences life, whether they have experienced childhood trauma, and if living a sheltered life may influence OCD later in life.

These studies suggest that:

- Experiencing trauma, abuse, or bullying may all be triggers that bring on both obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors.
- Teenagers and young adults who were raised by anxious parents may learn obsessive compulsive behaviors.
- Teenagers and young adults who were raised by "helicopter" parents may find it difficult to cope in the world and may develop OCD to try and cope with the stress of adult life.
- Prolonged exposure to stress and the resultant anxiety seems to be quite a prominent OCD trigger.
- A sudden accident or trauma like a car accident or accidental death of a loved one has been shown to increase the likelihood of OCD.

- Pregnancy and/or childbirth have been shown to trigger the incidences of OCD in women, suggesting a biological or hormonal factor as well as a stress trigger.

Personality Traits

Certain personality traits, like those who have a tendency to stress more easily, or who are naturally timid or anxious, seem to be more likely to develop OCD. Added to this, people who are methodical or meticulous may develop OCD later in life when external factors, like kids, disrupt their lifestyle.

Biological/Genetic

As mentioned above, research is ongoing into whether or not certain genetic factors play a part in OCD development. Both genetics and a lack of certain brain chemicals like serotonin may strongly influence our predisposition to OCD.

This research is exploring how in utero genetic makeup, as well as the formation of the brain in infancy, could influence whether or not a person is more likely to develop OCD. Nothing conclusive has been established, although the research does seem promising.

Additional Research

There seems to be a strong connection between young OCD sufferers who have been exposed to the streptococcal bacteria. Research is being done into why OCD seems to suddenly occur in kids who have had a bout of scarlet fever or strep throat and what causes the brain to shift its thought processes.

While not much is known at this stage as to why the streptococcal bacteria can trigger OCD, it does seem that the symptoms of OCD do dissipate as unexpectedly as the onset of the OCD itself.

Common Symptoms and OCD-Related Conditions

Some mental illnesses can run concurrently or may be exacerbated by OCD. Almost all of these conditions are related to compulsions or compulsive behaviors that are triggered by specific obsessive thoughts.

Some of these conditions can include:

- Body dysmorphic disorder centering around the way a person looks.
- Hoarding disorder, which involves collecting and arranging or ordering things in a specific order.
- Excoriation, a disorder in which a person picks at their skin until harm is done.
- Trichotillomania, when a person pulls out or eats their own hair.
- Hypochondria, which involves believing a person has a certain illness or illnesses.
- Olfactory reference syndrome, in which a person believes they smell a certain way, usually unpleasant.

How OCD Is Diagnosed

OCD can be difficult to diagnose as not everyone with OCD has the same set of symptoms. You may be someone who doesn't

display all of the signs and symptoms associated with OCD but do have the condition and that is why it is important to consult a professional who can help to correctly diagnose you.

The first two questions a psychologist or doctor will ask themselves are: Does this person have obsessive thoughts, and do they act compulsively as a result of these thoughts?

What to Expect When Getting Diagnosed

When you visit your physician and therapist, you should expect a few steps to be taken to ensure your diagnosis is accurate.

If you have gone to a therapist first, they will request that you get a thorough psychological evaluation, which will involve a discussion of your thoughts and how you feel about these thoughts.

In addition, the therapist or doctor will discuss what symptoms you are experiencing and what behavioral patterns have been formed to try to soothe your thoughts.

An evaluation will be done into how these behaviors and thoughts affect the general quality of your life, and your therapist or doctor may also request your permission to interview your family and friends for a personal outsider's perception.

Once your doctor suspects an OCD diagnosis, they may refer to their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) to ask you other questions and to solidify their diagnosis of your condition.

You may also be asked to get a few medical tests done to rule out brain, bacterial, viral, or other physiological diseases that may be causing your OCD. This is especially true if your OCD is sudden or is not accompanied by a stress or trauma trigger.

The reason doctors and therapists are so thorough in their diagnosis of OCD is because conditions like anxiety disorders, depression, obsessive compulsive personality disorder, and even schizophrenia may all present themselves as OCD. It is therefore vitally important that your doctor is certain of your diagnosis so that you can begin a treatment plan that improves your quality of life.

Is Suppressing Your OCD Making It Worse?

Thought suppression is a common thread for those who have OCD. This is especially true for people who have the condition Pure Obsessional OCD. And, let's face it, no one really invites in thoughts that induce anxiety, but for those who have OCD, pushing away those thoughts, or trying to control them, is almost as natural as breathing.

The issue with suppressing thoughts and emotions is that they return, and often come back with much greater intensity and frequency. Think of OCD thoughts as a hungry toddler—they will demand to be heard until they are fed, and thoughts and emotions are no different.

Not thinking about “it” is just not realistic, nor are distraction techniques when it comes to OCD, but if you have OCD then you will already know this. And the issue with OCD is that the intrusive thoughts are often standing front and center, stealing

the spotlight from just about everything else in your life. I'm sure you have asked yourself more than once, "Why do I have intrusive thoughts over and over again but I will forget where I put my car keys at least three times a day?"

Let's do a quick exercise to demonstrate just how ineffective thought suppression is. I am going to ask you to think about a white dog for the next five minutes. Whenever another thought comes into your mind, replace it with the white dog and write it down so that you have an estimate of how many times you replaced your thoughts.

Once the five minutes is up, I am going to ask you to NOT think about the white dog.

Sounds simple, doesn't it?

Write down how many times you thought of the white dog when you shouldn't have.

Chances are that you thought about the white dog at least twice as much when you weren't supposed to than when you were supposed to.

Why?

Because the more effort you put into trying to rid your brain of its thoughts, the more you will think about the thoughts. And there is nothing wrong with your brain, regardless of whether or not you have OCD, the only difference is how you process the information within your mind.

Think of your brain as a giant super-computer. It waits for certain commands to retrieve a memory, or to perform a certain action. Giving your brain the instruction to "not think about white dogs," does one thing and one thing only—it provides the

brain with the keywords “white dog,” and it duly does its job of fetching the white dog from your memory, presenting it as a white dog.

This is the reason why people who train their minds to say “I am a non-smoker,” rather than “I quit smoking,” are more successful at breaking the habit forever. Because, the one statement says “I do not smoke and I never have”, and so the brain dismisses cigarettes, as opposed to the other statement that says “I used to smoke, let me fetch that memory and present you with the physiological responses to not having a cigarette for a while.”

The brain is remarkable and it is important that you acknowledge that the complexity of it can be mastered to bring you what you need if you learn to speak to yourself (to your brain) correctly.

You cannot control your thoughts, it’s just not possible because your brain is not wired that way and it never will be. But you can reframe your thoughts, tricking your brain into believing something entirely different, and ultimately having it create the reality you want. In essence, you become the master of your mind rather than your mind being the puppet master of your life.

OCD Treatments

I want to be honest with you right from the outset, while some people have short bouts of OCD that may never return, OCD is not a curable illness. Treatments are designed to help you to live with and manage your symptoms so that you can enjoy life again. If you suffer from severe OCD, you will need to make peace with the fact that your treatment will be long-term and

ongoing. Having said that, having OCD doesn't mean you will be miserable for the remainder of your life. There are so many people out there just like you and me who are living a happy, successful, amazing life despite their OCD diagnosis.

There are two main treatment options for OCD—psychotherapy and medications. Added to this, home remedies are very effective when used in conjunction with psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy

Therapies like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) work well to treat OCD. They address the obsession, the compulsion, and the ritualistic behaviors associated with OCD. Both of these therapies, or indeed any treatment, will require effort and practice on your behalf so that you can learn to manage your obsessions and compulsions correctly.

Other Treatment Options

OCD treatment can be combined with a number of alternative therapies. These can include:

- Outpatient and even inpatient treatment programs designed to offer you intensive therapy.
- Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS), an FDA-approved treatment for people over the age of 18.
- Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS), another FDA-approved treatment for people aged 22 to 68 years.

Always make sure to research alternative treatments so that you can weigh up the pros and cons as well as knowing what the possible risks to your health are.

At Home and Lifestyle Treatment

Managing OCD requires you to be an active participant in your treatment plan. This means you will need to make some lifestyle changes and become disciplined in your treatment.

1. Always practice what you are taught by your medical and mental health professionals. These techniques are designed to help you manage your symptoms and practicing them regularly will help them to become a habit in your life.
2. Take your medication when you are supposed to.
3. Be aware of triggers and warning signs so that you can manage your OCD before it overtakes you.
4. Do not take other medications if you have been prescribed OCD meds.
5. Join a support group.
6. Set goals and remain focused on those goals.
7. Learn healthy coping outlets that you can channel your energy into.
8. Learn relaxation methods like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness.
9. Form a routine and stick to your regular activities.

A Word on Medication

Becoming medicated for your condition is nothing unusual. Some of the medications that are prescribed for OCD include:

- Fluoxetine (Prozac)
- Clomipramine (Anafranil)
- Fluvoxamine
- Paroxetine (Paxil, Pexeva)
- Sertraline (Zoloft) for adults and children 6 years and older

Here are some issues to discuss with your doctor about medications for OCD:

What medications are available to you, what is the cost of those medications, and are their generics available to you?

What are the side effects of the medications prescribed to you?

Is there a suicide risk associated with the medications?

Are there interactions with other medications or herbal remedies?

What will happen when you stop the medications?

Famous People Who Live With OCD

OCD doesn't discriminate and people from all walks of life suffer from it. Well-known celebrities are doing their part to destigmatize the condition and to highlight not just the struggles they have gone through, but the methods they used to overcome OCD.

David Beckham (n.d.): "I have got this disorder where I have to have everything in a straight line or everything has to be in pairs. I'll put my Pepsi cans in the fridge and if there's one too many then I'll put it in another cupboard

somewhere. I'll go into a hotel room and before I can relax, I have to move all the leaflets and all the books and put them in a drawer."

Beckham uses a combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, meditation, and mindfulness.

Billy Bob Thornton (n.d.):

"My phobias have been greatly exaggerated. I don't mind a chair. I can go as far back as you want with Asia or Mexico. It's that French/English/Scottish old mildew stuff. Old dusty heavy drapes and big tables with lions' heads carved in it. Stuff that kings were around. That's the stuff I can't be around. It was too big to be functional. It creeps me out."

Thornton's OCD is attributed to the trauma he was subjected to as a child.

Maria Bamford (n.d.): "When I was about 9 years old, I stopped being able to sleep at night 'cause I had a fear I was going to kill my parents."

Bramford only sought professional treatment at the age of 35 and advocates for the destigmatizing of OCD.

Lena Dunham (n.d.):

"I'm eight, and I'm afraid of everything. The list of things that keep me up at night includes but is not limited to appendicitis, typhoid, leprosy, unclean meats, foods I haven't seen emerge from their packaging...homeless people, rape, kidnapping, milk, the subway, sleep."

Dunham's parents understood the severity of her mental illness and put her in therapy from a young age.

Charlize Theron (n.d.): "I have OCD, which is not fun, I have to be incredibly tidy and organized or it messes with my mind and switches off on me."

Theron's OCD began after a traumatic event in her childhood. Theron's management plan includes her admitting that she has an illness that requires daily treatment and effort from herself.

Leonardo DiCaprio (n.d.): "My thing was not stepping on cracks, or not stepping on certain things. Sometimes it took me 10 minutes to get to the set because I'd be pacing back and forth, stepping on gum stains."

DiCaprio uses a combination of ERP, CBT, medication, and mindful practices.

These are only a few famous people who live with OCD, and there are many more who are doing the groundwork to ensure that people are able to come forward and speak about their mental illness with confidence. Many of these celebrities were diagnosed and began treatment before their rise to fame, and are proof that success is possible when OCD is managed correctly.

If you are still unsure of whether or not you have OCD, or if you should seek treatment, I urge you to take the 3-minute OCD test listed below.

<https://www.psycom.net/do-i-have-ocd-test>

This test will help you to ascertain where you currently stand with your obsessions and compulsions.

Now that you know a little bit more about OCD, it's important that you begin to formulate a plan that works for you to help you in managing your symptoms. The next chapters of this

book will help you to create these plans and will assist you in proactively managing your conditions.

Chapter 2: How Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Can Help

Things may happen around you, and things may happen to you, but the only things that matter are the things that happen in you. —Eric Butterworth

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a form of talk therapy. The aim of CBT is to help a person to manage their thoughts and change their behaviors and reactions to their thought processes.

CBT is the preferred therapy for depression and anxiety-related illnesses like OCD but is used to treat other forms of mental illness too.

The aim of CBT is to explore how your thoughts and feelings are connected to the physical sensations and reactions perpetuated by what you are thinking. This helps you become aware of your actions, and the thought-triggers that bring about behaviors to break the cycle of thought and action.

CBT helps us to deal with the issues they are facing in a positive, constructive way, breaking these issues down into smaller, more manageable parts. Each of these parts is then examined and methods are provided to help you change the negative patterns you may have formed.

What is important to remember is that CBT focuses on the right now, and will not deal with past issues. This form of therapy is

therefore a great way to improve your current state of mind and works well with mindfulness and meditation to help you manage your behaviors.

Over time, CBT reprograms the way we think and, as such, the way we feel. This, in turn, changes our poor behaviors and repetitive negative coping mechanisms that we form through our thoughts.

The Core Principles of CBT

CBT follows a combination of core principles that will help you change your thought processes and the reaction you have to those thought processes. These principles challenge the key thought distortions that people with OCD suffer from.

Principle of Emotional Responsibility (CBT/REBT)

Shakespeare's Hamlet said, “nothing is as good or bad unless we think it so,” and this saying is certainly true for the first principle of CBT.

Cognitive therapy revolves around the premise that our reactions influence our behaviors. In other words, our thoughts, beliefs, and inferences can strongly influence how we behave.

If I had to ask you to list what makes you feel sad, nervous, anxious, angry, etc., you would probably recount a situation or life event that provoked these reactions. When we think about past events that invoke a feeling or emotion, we surrender ourselves to our feelings and to the thoughts surrounding those feelings.

You see, the only way to undo those feelings of negativity when we surrender them to a previous event is for the event to have never happened, or for the person who upset us to undo what they have done. Now, unless you have found a way to time travel, this is impossible, but the thoughts are still there, aren't they?

Let's look at an example.

Sam has made lunch arrangements at 1 p.m. with a friend. She has been going through a rough patch at the moment and is feeling depressed. Sam arrives at the restaurant on time and her friend arrives 10 minutes late.

CBT will seek to ascertain what Sam's thoughts and feelings are.

For example:

Sam feels sad. She thinks her friend being late for their lunch arrangements is proof that she is a burden on the people she cares about, and that her friend doesn't care about her depression.

Alternatively, Sam may feel angry at her friend because she thinks her friend puts her work and other priorities ahead of Sam.

Once Sam has learned to reprogram her thought processes, though, she may think that her friend being 10 minutes late is not catastrophic and that her friend's behavior is not an indication of something she has done.

Or that her friend may have run into some delays and she chooses to text her friend to find out if everything is okay. Once her friend texts back, Sam chooses to brush off the event as no big deal and feels calm and relaxed as she orders herself

something to drink and scrolls through her phone while she waits.

As you can see, the same event can elicit different reactions and behaviors based on how Sam chooses to challenge or analyze her thoughts.

The General Principle of Emotional Responsibility

Before I continue with the explanation of the General Principle of Emotional Responsibility, it is important for you to understand that there is a difference between emotions and feelings.

Emotions are primal and uncontrollable and can be broken down into happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. These are the only four emotions we have and they occur as a result of external stimuli the brain experiences. If you perceive danger, you will experience fear; if you experience a loss, you will experience sadness, etc. Emotions are fleeting and last for a maximum of 90 seconds. They exist to create a physiological response from our bodies in response to what is happening around us.

Feelings are what we choose to do with our emotions. For example, you may experience the emotion of fear. You can choose what you do with that emotion. Either you can choose to be anxious, or you can choose to feel excited. Both feelings will have the same physiological response but the thought processes will be different.

That's right! You have no control over your emotions, but you have a whole lot of control over how you feel!

Getting back to the general principle of emotional r—we need to accept responsibility for our responses to our emotions.

When we don't acknowledge that we have a choice and control over our responses and our behaviors once we experience an emotion, we are accepting that we are nothing more than a slave to our brain and our impulses.

The Specific Principle of Emotional Responsibility

This principle addresses our cognitions and biases as the cause of our inability to control our feelings and moods and, as a result, our impulses and behaviors. Unhealthy beliefs like "I am worthless" work to destroy mental processes in the same way as healthy thoughts like "I am capable" help us to advance in life.

The specific principle of emotional responsibility seeks to challenge our thoughts so that we can see that how we feel and how we act can be changed if we choose to live in the here and now rather than in the past.

The Behavioral Principle

CBT trains us to see that what we do or our behaviors play an important role in changing or maintaining our current psychological states. At this stage of CBT programs, you will be required to confront your biases and confirmations in order to challenge the outcomes of your thoughts. For example, if you have a fear of speaking because you believe others will see you as a fake (imposter syndrome), you may have avoided speaking entirely. But, by not speaking, you are denying yourself the opportunity to refute your thoughts that you are an imposter. And it's been proven that changing our perception of what is happening around us has a huge impact on our emotions and our feelings.

The Here and Now Principle

Other forms of therapy seek to uncover current issues by looking at past events. CBT, however, deals with the here and now rather than uncovering past traumas and learned behaviors.

Traditional forms of therapy argue that by not dealing with past issues the problem will reoccur later on. This concept has been debunked, though, and new research shows that the likelihood of an issue resurfacing after a person learns to live in the here and now is very rare (Swerdlow et al., 2020).

The Principle of Psychological Interactionism

When going through CBT, you will be challenged to explore the concept that implies that much of what you choose to focus on is what your thoughts and obsessions will revolve around. Remember when I said your brain is like a big supercomputer? Well, CBT aims to give you the right keywords so that your brain has the opportunity to respond correctly to the emotions you are experiencing.

The Scientific Principle

Finally, once you have explored all other principles, your therapist will present you with scientific theories and proof that the methods you are being given are not just anecdotal but work.

This final step is incredibly important because it provides a solid foundation for us to build on the techniques we are being taught, and instills confidence in the methodologies used to help you manage your symptoms.

CBT works well for the treatment and management of OCD because it teaches us to challenge our thoughts through

changing our behaviors. CBT can be tough, especially when we have learned some pretty destructive coping mechanisms but, as a treatment, it is incredibly effective.

The Pros and Cons of CBT

No therapy is foolproof and there will always be a chance that the feelings, behaviors, and thoughts you are currently having will return at some point. The advantage of going through therapy, though, is that when they return, you are better equipped to deal with them.

Because of this, it is important that you continue to practice the skills you learn through CBT and the other treatments that work for you in managing your OCD.

As mentioned before, CBT is incredibly effective in the management of OCD, but it may not be suitable for everyone. Most of the time, CBT is not effective because we just aren't ready to commit to helping ourselves get better, while other times CBT will need to be used in conjunction with other therapies that help us to deal with the root cause of our issues.

The Advantages of CBT

- Massively effective as a treatment for OCD and other mental health disorders. In fact, most studies suggest that CBT is more effective than medication alone.
- CBT doesn't take months to work and you could begin to see positive changes in your life within a very short period of time.

- CBT, unlike other therapies, tackles the issues at hand and retrains your thought processes so that your behaviors alter and your feelings follow suit.
- The skills you learn in CBT are practical and helpful and can be used in almost every facet of your life, not just for your OCD. This means you can use what you have learned from your CBT sessions for years to come so that you can succeed in life.

The Disadvantages of CBT

- You need to be ready to commit to your treatment and to your part in managing your OCD symptoms. If you aren't ready yet or aren't fully committed to the treatment, the therapy may be less than effective or not effective at all.
- CBT takes time and effort. You will need to make sure that you are doing your part when you are at home so that you can feel the full benefits of the therapy.
- CBT is structured by nature and this might mean that you will need to build new routines that support a more rigid lifestyle. This rigidity doesn't last forever, though, so take comfort in the fact that you will be able to live a comfortable, free life.
- During the course of your treatment, you will have to confront your feelings and your behaviors. This means CBT can be emotionally taxing for some people.
- CBT will not address previous issues or the root cause of your current issues. As such, you may need to consider more than one kind of therapy for you to regain control of your mental state.

- You will need to want to change your life as a whole and not just your mental wellbeing. This means making small changes to your life including your diet, health, and physical wellness.

Many of the reasons that CBT may not be effective revolve around our willingness to change and our readiness to face the issues at hand. For many of us, the prospect of change is scary and so we would rather remain comfortable in our unhappiness and dysfunction. Growth is uncomfortable but it is hugely rewarding too, and CBT will help you to see your full potential for success.

CBT and OCD—Why It Works

Because OCD begins with obsessive thoughts, therapy is necessary to address these thoughts and to break the bond between our thoughts and our negative compulsive behaviors.

CBT not only challenges how we think but how to replace our destructive behaviors with positive ones that encourage growth and excitement for life.

When entering into cognitive behavioral therapy, you will be asked to not only work with your therapist in office but to also do homework that will help you to regain control of your life. This homework will include techniques like deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation as well as mindfulness.

When attending your CBT sessions, certain techniques will be used to treat your OCD and the symptoms of the condition.

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) in CBT

One of the most useful techniques used in the treatment of OCD is CBT with ERP. During an ERP session, you can expect to be exposed to your stress triggers, especially those that cause obsessive thoughts. During this exposure, you will be shown techniques that will help you prevent yourself from engaging in compulsive behaviors.

When we prevent ourselves from performing the ritualistic behaviors that we use to soothe our obsessive thoughts, we begin to retrain our brain into using positive coping mechanisms. Added to this, when we are prevented from performing ritualistic behaviors, we deprive our body from receiving the temporary relief associated with our compulsions and we face our anxiety.

ERP can include:

1. In vivo exposure involves real-life exposure to a trigger or stimulus. This is done by repeatedly placing you in the presence of your fear in small doses over a long period of time.
2. Imaginal exposure will be used when it is not possible for you to be exposed to a particular trigger or if exposure through in vivo is too traumatic. You will be asked to mentally visualize a fear stimulus and will be asked to not participate in compulsive behaviors once you feel triggered.
3. Ritual/response is the final step in ERP and will have you refrain from compulsive behaviors for a long period of time after being exposed to a fear trigger.

Deep Breathing Exercises

During your CBT sessions, you will be taught how to breathe correctly so that you can manage your anxiety and compulsive responses to a stress trigger or thought. Breathwork exercises have been proven to be extremely helpful in not just managing anxiety, but in halting compulsions and redirecting thoughts.

Deep breathing exercises are so effective that they have been shown to reduce your heart rate, and interrupt the body's fight or flight response almost immediately.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a skill that will be taught to you so that you can learn how to physically tighten and relax the muscles in your body. This is done to teach you how to focus on your body when you are anxious and how to relax your muscles so that you do not automatically enter into a fight or flight response. This technique will help you to regain control of the physiological processes associated with anxiety and fear and allows you to disengage from compulsive behaviors.

Cognitive Restructuring

Your therapist will also teach you how to challenge your thoughts and the thinking patterns you are currently experiencing. When we challenge our thoughts, we give ourselves the opportunity to replace irrational thoughts with rational ones that are factual and based in reality. For you to manage your OCD, you will need to not only understand your

triggers, but effectively direct your thoughts to positivity and growth.

I will cover cognitive restructuring in more detail in a later chapter, but the great thing about this technique is that you are in total control of your success.

CBT has helped millions of people around the world to regain control over their lives. As a therapy, CBT has been shown to be one of the only proven methods to effectively treat OCD over prolonged periods of time.

In fact, 75% of people who use CBT as one of their preferred treatment methods for OCD have reported that a combination of CBT and at-home learned skills have helped them to manage their condition effectively (O'Neill et al., 2015).

How Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Helps to Improve Brain Connectivity

The efficacy of CBT in treating the root cause and symptoms of OCD are still being explored and some of these studies include the effects of CBT on your brain. Through functional MRI (fMRI) imaging, scientists have been able to track and monitor how CBT improves brain connectivity, and how it creates lasting changes in our brains.

One of these studies included 43 people with diagnosed OCD and 24 people without OCD. These two study groups were monitored throughout their CBT testing, with the non-OCD group being used as the control group in the study.

The 43 people with OCD received intensive ERP-based CBT, for 90-minutes daily, five days a week, for four weeks. During these sessions, the patients were scanned to see how their brains changed throughout the process.

By the end of these intensive therapy sessions, the scans of those participants with OCD showed huge differences with increased connectivity between a whopping eight different networks in the brain.

One of these areas that showed massive changes was the cerebellum, which processes information and controls involuntary movements. Added to this the other areas affected included the parts of the brain that are used for learning processes and planned actions and behaviors.

What these studies show is that CBT has a profound impact on the brain in the areas that will exact change when dealing with compulsive behaviors. By increasing the pathways and improving the connectivity between the areas of the brain that promote learning, non-compulsive behaviors are able to replace destructive compulsive behaviors.

Other therapies have shown that changes in the brain are usually compensatory, meaning the changes don't last, whereas CBT produces lasting results because people continue to practice the skills they have learned in their therapy sessions.

All of this means that CBT shows quantifiable, proven, positive changes in the way your brain functions. And for myself, this gives me a lot of confidence and hope for anyone's future when they live with OCD.

CBT Exercises You Can Do at Home

OCD can feel overwhelming and these feelings of anxiety or the need to avoid feeling anxious and fearful can have us do everything in our power to avoid our triggers. CBT teaches us that facing our fears head-on is more constructive, and that by facing our fears, we can rid ourselves of our obsessions and our compulsions.

In the past, therapists used to expose people to their fears by exposing them to that fear without gradual integration. This process is called flooding, and while it can be extremely effective for some, others reported a trauma response. Flooding techniques are still used for those of us who are able to tolerate it, or who want to give it a try, but for the most part, fear exposure should be done gradually to help your mind adjust to what is happening.

Think of it this way. Some people respond well to jumping into the deep end of a swimming pool, and others prefer to dip their toe into the water before slowly descending the steps, wading through the shallow end, and acclimatizing themselves to the temperature and depth of the water.

Both methods of entering the pool will have the same outcome—you'll end up in the deep end, it's just the time it will take to get to that outcome that differs.

With this in mind, the exercises I have given you to practice at home are designed not to throw you into the deep end, but to rather expose you to your fears in a step-by-step way that helps you to both understand your fears and to desensitize you from them. Slow exposure makes your fears more tolerable and

ensures that you are ready to swim, so to speak, rather than feeling like you are drowning.

I am not, by any means, saying that it will be easy for you to face your fears, and at times you may feel like you are drowning, but I assure you that by doing these tasks gradually, and by allowing yourself to acclimatize, you will empower yourself to eventually be able to jump into the deep end as if it was natural for you.

Yes, flooding does work for some people, but for most of us it can just be too much, and the point is for you to feel like you are in control of your obsessions and compulsions, not that you are trying desperately to stay afloat.

And finally, it is important for you to understand that jumping into the deep end when you are fully aware that you cannot swim is just looking for troubles and further issues. You need to acquire the skill of swimming before you enter the water. The same is true for CBT and ERP.

Take the time to read this book and to examine your triggers before using the exposure activities listed below. Understanding what it is that drives your obsessions and your compulsions (dipping your toe into the water) is the first step to learning how to swim.

Challenging Your Obsessions

Before I begin with the exercises you can do at home to help you to face your fears and begin to manage the symptoms of your fears, it is critical that you know that these ERP exposure exercises are not for all categories of OCD.

Categories of OCD that involves thoughts of self-harm, harming others, sexual compulsions, violence, or moral compulsions should be addressed with a professional and ERP exercises need to be done in a controlled, clinical environment.

Cleanliness and Contamination Exercises

For those who have OCD, cleanliness and contamination issues are usually at the forefront of our minds. Having a clean or overly orderly area helps us to feel in control of our obsessions and ensures that we know where to find things when our minds are preoccupied with our obsessions.

Desensitizing yourself from contamination and cleanliness obsessions and compulsions are by far the most common for OCD sufferers, and thankfully, they are some of the easiest to confront.

Before you begin these exercises, make sure that you are as calm as you possibly can be, and center yourself with your breath.

1. Lightly touch a small area on the sole of your shoe. Now, without washing your hands, touch a surface in your home. As you begin to desensitize yourself, expand the area you touch—perhaps the kitchen counter, bathroom sink, your bed, clean clothes, etc.
2. Touch an animal while you are out walking. Without washing or disinfecting your hands, touch some of your other belongings.
3. Touch items in a shop and then, without disinfecting or washing your hands, reach for your wallet, touch your clothing, or hold your handbag.
4. Place all of the objects you believe are contaminated into a bag, or a box, and then dip your hand into the bag,

selecting an item at random. Place this object in its correct storage area without disinfecting it and without washing your hands.

5. Sit on a park bench, or a public seating area, and then go home and sit on your sofa, chairs, or bed without changing your clothes or washing your hands.
6. Remove your clothing at the end of the day and place it at the bottom of your bed. When you wake up the next morning, walk around the house and touch objects that you use daily with the worn clothing.

Overactive Sense of Danger Exercises

An overactive sense of danger can be debilitating and can take up so much of your time. Checking and rechecking because we fear that we will be responsible for a catastrophic event can lead to a whole lot of time being wasted and feelings of despair creeping in as life passes us by.

When doing the exercises below, it is important that you remain in control of the outcome so that your brain begins to understand that reasonable responsibility, not absolute responsibility, is safe behavior.

1. Leave your appliances plugged in, not on, while you leave the house. Try to leave the house for longer increments of time.
2. Leave a tap running slowly in your home while you go for a walk.
3. Open an umbrella indoors.
4. Walk under balconies, on cracks, and over reasonably sized holes in the sidewalk when you are outdoors.
5. Place a pair of scissors or a knife on the table while you are chatting to a friend or while you are reading a book.

- Be sure to explain to your friend what you are doing and why.
6. Visit a club or area that is frequented by people of a different sexuality, or of the same or opposite sex, to challenge your identity obsessions.
 7. Make a mistake on purpose and then dismiss it.

Challenging Unwanted Thoughts Exercises

Intrusive and unwanted thoughts are central to OCD and can be addressed through ERP exercises too.

1. Voice note or record yourself verbalizing your thoughts. Play this recording back to yourself over and over again until you are tired of hearing it and you can rationalize the thought.
2. Watch short clips, series, or movies that trigger you on repeat until you are desensitized to the content.
3. Journal or write your fears down every time they enter your head until you are no longer thinking about these fears.
4. Journal a real-life scenario in which one of your fears takes place. Read this journal entry over and over again until you are desensitized.
5. Create art by scrapbooking, drawing, or painting your fear and place it in a prominent place where you can see the image throughout your day.
6. Sit down and purposefully think of an unwanted thought while you are rewarding yourself.
7. Write down your unwanted thoughts throughout the day and then throw the paper away in a bin you cannot access, or burn the paper in your sink, fireplace, or garden.

Other ERP Exercises You Can Do at Home

You can derive your own ERP exercises to specifically suit your OCD needs. The most important part of tailoring your at-home exercises is to make sure that you are slowly but consistently exposing yourself to your fears. This means you cannot repeat your behaviors in exactly the same way, and you will need to call upon your self-discipline to take a step forward every day, even if that step is minuscule.

Let's have a look at an example of this.

James has an irrational fear of dogs. He doesn't only fear injury from the animal, but the cleanliness and contamination risks associated with dogs. James tailors an ERP program to desensitize himself of this fear as follows:

1. Day 1—Sit on a park bench at a reasonable distance from the leashed dog.
2. Day 2—Ask the dog's owner to bring the dog closer, halving the distance.
3. Day 3—Have the dog's owner bring the dog to your feet while on its leash.
4. Day 4—Allow the dog to touch you but do not touch the dog back.
5. Day 5—Hold the dog's leash.
6. Day 6—Take the dog for a walk across the park.
7. Day 7—Allow the dog to touch you, take the dog for a walk, and pet the dog after the walk.
8. Day 8—Allow the dog to touch you, take the dog for a walk, pet the dog after the walk, and do not wash your hands.
9. Day 9—Allow the dog to touch you, take the dog for a walk, pet the dog after the walk, do not wash your hands, and touch a personal item with unwashed hands.

This example can be expanded upon almost infinitely until James has confronted all of his fears associated with the dog. And, as you can see by the plan outlaid, the steps James is taking are small but meaningful.

For myself, desensitization came more as a flood, especially once I had kids. The fear of my children contaminating everything was enormous, and I remember, at one stage, describing the children I adore and would give my life for as Petri dishes of germs and bacteria. Before I began ERP, I would run myself ragged, trying to clean everything they touched. My house smelled like a hospital and, ironically, my children were sick all of the time because over-cleanliness made it a certainty that they had no opportunity to build their immune system.

I started slowly, allowing myself the opportunity to let them live their lives as children, and letting go of the fact that everything should be germ-free. I understood that if I was to ever free myself of the guilt I was feeling for not spending time with them in their formative years because I was permanently cleaning up after them, I would need to allow them to experience life, which can be messy at times.

And now? Well, I would be lying if I said the contamination and mess don't bother me, but I have the ability to let it go. I now understand that a small ketchup smear is not going to create any major issues if it isn't cleaned up immediately. I get to live life with my children and experience the messiness that is life. Ironically, I discovered that allowing them to live, and allowing myself to let go and live, is the closest that life could possibly be to perfection.

Chapter 3: The Power of Mindfulness and Lifestyle Changes

Everything is created twice, first in the mind and then in reality. – Robin Sharma

Mindfulness is a modern buzzword but the reality is that mindfulness and meditation are hardly something new.

The exact origins of mindfulness are not 100% sure, but the practice can be traced back to Indian Buddhist traditions. The concept of mindfulness surrounds awareness, attention, and alertness to how you are feeling and the circumstances you are facing. Additionally, it focuses on your ability to accept how you are feeling and then letting go of your feelings, accepting them as fleeting.

The mindfulness movement has traveled across the world, evolving as new cultures embraced it. The mindfulness that we practice today is a combination of these early practices and Tibetan Buddhist breath-attention techniques as well as Japanese Zen meditation practices.

Almost all spiritual practices involve mindfulness to a certain extent, and these practices can include anything from meditation to yoga, dance, and even prayer. Millions of people over the world practice mindfulness as a way to cope with the stresses and strains of life, and science shows that mindful breath-attention exercises are an effective way to combat stress, anxiety, and depression.

Because OCD is an anxiety-based disorder, mindfulness is incredibly effective in treating the thoughts associated with the mental illness, and research suggests that people experience a 35% improvement in their symptoms after the first week of incorporating the practices in their lives (Külz et al., 2014).

When mindfulness is combined with other lifestyle changes like a balanced diet, exercise, and seeking to find a good work-life balance, it can go a long way in helping to manage your OCD symptoms.

What Exactly Is Mindfulness

Before I get into the explanation of what mindfulness is, and how it can benefit you in treating your OCD, I would like to explain what it is not because people often confuse it for a religious, mystical, or spiritual practice. If that were the case, prominent atheists wouldn't be practicing, nor would they be promoting the benefits of mindfulness.

Separating mindfulness from any religion or spiritual practice allows you to see it for what it is—a means to reconnect with yourself and with the life around you while you embrace the fact that the world goes through the inevitable phases it does.

Mindfulness helps us to understand and accept that nothing in life is permanent and that we are all constantly in a state of flux.

Now that you know what mindfulness is, it becomes easier to understand the “technical” definition of the practice.

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully conscious and aware of our emotions, thoughts, and feelings without judgment or criticism of these aspects of our existence. In other words,

mindfulness allows us to be fully present in the moment, without ever seeking to change the past, or without worrying about the future. It teaches us to live from moment to moment and not for the moment we are experiencing.

Meditation and mindfulness may have been used originally for spiritual purposes, but people have been using it for centuries to help them gain relief from depression, pain, anxiety, and stress. You see, life can be all about pain and suffering if you choose for it to be that way, or it can be wonderful and amazing if you choose it to be.

Life doesn't need to be negative, and while you may experience challenges along the way, it can be incredibly meaningful and joyous if we allow it to be. For most of us, though, we get in our own way of happiness by overthinking and trying to control and manipulate life rather than allowing it to unfold the way we desire it to be.

Mindfulness is certainly not narcissistic, nor is it detaching or opting out from life. It is embracing life and the chaos that it can create. Ultimately, life cannot be perfect, that is not the way life is designed to be, and with mindfulness, we are able to understand how our mind works and where we are tying ourselves in knots over our thoughts. It allows us the moment we need to process the information we are being given by our brain so that we can actually choose how we would like to feel.

The General Benefits of OCD

There are so many benefits of mindfulness for numerous conditions, including physical conditions, that's why so many people praise how beneficial it is. Studies have been done into

the benefits of mindfulness and almost all have come back raving about how effective it is for a balanced life.

From stress reduction to improved sleep, it is clear that mindfulness should be incorporated into the treatment of most mental wellness practices. Some of the proven benefits of mindfulness are listed below.

A Significant Reduction in Stress

Science has shown that mindfulness reduces stress hormones in the brain and helps us to feel calm and relaxed. Because long-term stress is so detrimental to our mental and physical health, mindfulness is very beneficial to our overall wellbeing (Wielgosz., et al. 2019).

Greatly Improved Quality of Sleep

A reduction in stress and the overall feelings of relaxation and calm helps to improve the quality and quantity of sleep you get. This helps you to feel more rested and energized for the day, further reducing your stress.

An Improvement in Your Physical Health

Mindfulness has been shown to help us keep pain under control and to lower both blood pressure and heart rate. All of this is great news for your physical health because it gives us control over our pain responses and management and reduces cortisol levels (the stress hormone) in our brain and body (Wielgosz., et al. 2019).

An Improvement in Your Mental Health

Research shows that mindfulness significantly improves a person's mental health and has been shown to be an effective treatment for a wide range of mental wellness issues.

How Mindfulness Helps You to Manage Your OCD

In the past, a mere 50% of people with OCD benefited from the treatments on offer. The rest were doomed to live with the debilitating symptoms of the illness.

With research into CBT, ERP, and mindfulness, though, success rates in treatment have skyrocketed, and OCD sufferers who put in the effort and who are serious about their treatment plans are very successfully managing their condition.

OCD really is debilitating, and while it may be downplayed a lot of the time, and used as an explanation for being a stickler for details, it is a very serious condition. So serious, in fact, that it features as one of the top 10 most debilitating psychiatric disorders.

Remember, OCD never truly goes away, and you will need to learn to manage your symptoms as the condition is triggered or goes through its fluctuating patterns. Mindfulness, when used in conjunction with CBT and ERP, has been shown to be the single most effective treatment in the management of OCD, and it can significantly improve your quality of life.

Because mindfulness discourages you from suppressing your thoughts and feelings and, instead, has you acknowledge them without judgment, it allows you the time to process the rationality of your thoughts.

Using this three-layered approach is brilliant because with CBT you are able to identify your obsessions, while ERP exposes and desensitizes you to your triggers, and finally, mindfulness teaches you acknowledgment and how to let go without suppressing anything.

Mindfulness begins by teaching us to acknowledge and accept our symptoms without labels, judgment, or criticism. We are taught how to be compassionate with ourselves and with how we are feeling rather than bashing ourselves and berating our thoughts.

Once you have learned the art of self-compassion, mindfulness teaches you how to become less reactive to your thoughts, effectively giving you directions to the autopilot switch that has you perpetuating your compulsions. Once you are no longer working on autopilot, your compulsions become a choice because you will no longer be a slave to your self-soothing actions.

Finally, mindfulness helps you to categorize your thoughts by relevance and lets you see that, when you don't place significance on certain thoughts, they cannot dominate your headspace, nor can they force you back into autopilot. Essentially, you teach your mind that some thoughts are literally just a string of words recalled from memory and not an actual instruction to be acted upon.

When we can learn to both accept and become willing to understand that sometimes thoughts are exactly what they are, just a fleeting moment of words strung together, we can learn to tolerate what goes on in our head rather than agonizing over why we are thinking these thoughts in the first place.

For people with milder OCD symptoms, mindfulness is the go-to treatment, and no further therapies or medications are suggested for the condition, which in itself is a testimony of how powerful being mindful is.

Types of Mindfulness for OCD

Mindfulness can be practiced in a whole host of ways and doesn't need to look like the traditional picture of a person sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, in a state of deep meditation.

The reality is that some of us just don't have the capability to sit still for five or ten minutes, and we certainly don't have the luxury of having a mind that will focus on anything one thing for that period of time.

Thankfully, being mindful can be incorporated into a host of different daily activities and, as long as you are focused, engaged, and committed to self-compassion, you are being mindful.

The same can be said for how often you choose to actively practice mindfulness, and while there is no set time to put aside for your mindfulness sessions, in the beginning, it is a good idea to set aside at least some time daily until you have the hang of how to be mindful.

You don't need to stick to one form of mindfulness either which is what makes the practice so easy to integrate into your daily schedule.

A mindful schedule might look like this:

1. Mindfulness while eating my breakfast or drinking my coffee
2. Mindfulness while commuting to work
3. Mindfulness while doing yoga or stretching after work
4. Mindfulness while journaling before bed

As you can see, when you break down your mindful practices, it's pretty convenient and simple to fit it into your day.

It is important that when you enter into treatment for OCD you see your wellness plan as a full reboot of your life, and that means including a general wellness program for your life. Exercise and eating a balanced diet are critical to you being able to manage your symptoms, so find a balance that works for you.

Some of the most common mindful practices that people use in conjunction with their medical and therapy-based treatments include:

- Meditation practices
- Mindful breathing techniques and focusing on the breath
- Visualization of goals, dreams, and aspirations
- Body scanning, which involves you visualizing parts of your body to gain awareness and practice relaxation
- Mindful movement like yoga, tai chi, and qigong
- Journaling your day and your thoughts
- Sensory mindfulness like playing an instrument, listening to music, or painting, or drawing
- Nature therapy, where you take time outdoors to experience nature with all of your senses

Teach Yourself Common Mindful Practices

As you now know, mindful practices are very easy to incorporate into your daily routines and can be done by just about anyone of any age. With a little bit of planning and awareness, just about anything you do in your day-to-day life

can be turned into a mindful moment, if you know how to become mindful in the moment.

Two of the most prevalent mindful practices will be explored in depth in the next two chapters—progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) and breathing techniques, but let's take a look at some other ways you can teach yourself how to become mindful.

Body Scan

A great way to relieve and release tension that is manifesting itself in tight and sore muscles, body scan mindfulness makes you aware of where you are carrying your stress and helps you to release that stress from your body and mind.

Body scanning might not seem like a mindful practice; but because it involves you mentally scanning each part of your body to bring awareness to its separate parts, it can be considered to be a form of mindfulness.

The goal of body scanning is to relieve you from any physical discomfort you may be in, and to bring awareness to where you carry your tension so that you are able to prevent future issues before they compound.

Practicing body scanning is simple and easy to do, and can be done in the comfort of your own home.

Instructions

1. Find a place you can be comfortable in and where you will be uninterrupted for five or more minutes. Switch off, or silence your mobile devices. If you are more comfortable lying down to body scan before you sleep, make sure to complete your nighttime routine first.

2. Once you are comfortable, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly and with control. Make sure that you are breathing from your belly and not your chest. If you're not too sure whether or not you are breathing correctly, place your hands on your belly. It should be inflating and deflating with every breath like a big balloon.
3. Once you have control of your breathing, you can begin to place focus on your body. Start by bringing awareness to your toes and feet. Keep your attention on your feet, noticing how they feel. If there is pain or tension, acknowledge this with acceptance and observe whether or not you are having any thoughts associated with the sensations. Now breathe through these feelings and emotions before slowly moving up to your legs.
4. In the beginning phases of training yourself in body scanning, you may notice that you feel a little bit uncomfortable with the sensations in certain parts of your body. It is important that you breathe through this discomfort, visualizing the pain and tension leaving your body with every breath out. Only move on to another part of your body when you are ready to, and when you have breathed through the tension and sensations.
5. Now, move on to another part of your body and begin the process again. Each area of your body may feel different from the next and that is perfectly normal and fine. What is important is that you learn how to acknowledge the physical sensations and the feelings associated with them. Try not to get fed up with yourself, just keep breathing through any pain, pressure, or tightness that you may come across. This will help your body to release the tension it is carrying.

Pro Tip

You probably won't get body scanning right the first time and that is perfectly fine, not many of us do. As you become more mindful and aware, you will feel the tension and stress building in your body, and that is the perfect time to take a step back and practice body scanning.

If you don't have much time, or if you are already aware of what parts of your body are causing issues, you can do a quick abbreviated version of body scanning by focusing on only those parts.

Yoga

Yoga has been around for centuries and has been used to help people to become more centered, to manage their stress, and to improve the overall wellness of their body and mind.

Yoga practices have been shown to reduce the symptoms of depression, and because it is a form of exercise, it will help you to feel more relaxed while you improve your mental and physical health.

For those of us who have OCD, insomnia is a real issue and yoga is a great way to help you to improve the quality and quantity of sleep you are getting.

While yoga may have been an exclusive practice for many years, it is now freely available to the public and accessible to almost anyone. From free videos on YouTube, to exercise apps, corner yoga studios, gym offerings, and even community center get-togethers, yoga is an easy-to-access form of mindfulness.

Because yoga works to stretch and focus on certain muscle groups while challenging your stabilizer muscles, the mind actively engages in the task at hand, rather than on compulsive thoughts.

OCD sufferers can benefit from doing short yoga sessions in the morning and in the evening before bed to help clear and focus the mind and relax the body.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a form of meditation that helps you to relax and to draw your attention to something other than your thoughts. It forces your mind to focus on something for a prolonged period of time so that it can stop fetching irrelevant thoughts.

Visualization and guided imagery are incredibly powerful, and studies suggest that when used correctly and in line with a goal, it can reprogram the brain into believing it lives in a different reality. When this happens, the mind begins to form behaviors that support its perceived reality rather than perpetuating poor behaviors that supported its old reality.

If you are new to guided imagery, it's important that you begin with a fantasy scene in your mind that brings you peace and serenity. This could be a place you have been to, or somewhere you hope to visit, or it can be somewhere completely made up in your mind.

If you are not great at visualization, or if your mind prefers to communicate in words and numbers, try to search for an image that brings you calmness and peace. The point of guided imagery is to engage all or as many of your senses as you

possibly can, so go ahead and let your imagination run wild, but make sure it stays focused on the task at hand.

Instructions

1. Find a quiet spot where you will be uninterrupted for a minimum of five minutes. Make sure to switch your phone off, or silence it if you are using your phone to view an image.
2. Close your eyes, or focus on the picture you have selected and take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Focus on your breathing, inhaling and exhaling deeply and with control.
3. Now imagine a peaceful place or the place you feel the most peaceful. Breathe, and allow your mind to look around, taking in the details of this place.
4. Begin to hone in on the vision. What does it look like? Are there scents, sounds, or sensations associated with this place?
5. Imagine yourself being in the center of your imagined space. What do you look like? Are you happy? Free? At peace? Who is with you?
6. Hold your vision in your mind for a few minutes, no less than five minutes.
7. When you are ready to, refocus your mind on your breathing.
8. Take a few deep cleansing breaths, before counting to three, opening your eyes and releasing yourself from your vision.

Mindful Meditation

Meditation is all about exploring how we think and feel. It's never about having a fixed goal or destination in mind and it embraces the mind for what it should be. Meditation gives us the opportunity to be free of fixed thoughts and distractions for a moment and allows us to embrace our thoughts and emotions as fleeting rather than something to be acted on.

When we meditate we can analyze and explore the inner workings of our minds and the sensations we experience as living beings, as well as our innate ability to control our feelings and the choices we make in holding onto certain feelings.

Meditation with mindfulness requires us to suspend our judgment of ourselves and to release our inner child, curiously exploring whatever pops up in our mind at that point. And, just like we would speak to a child who asks an inappropriate question when you meditate, you should do so with compassion and empathy for yourself.

Mindful meditation affords us the opportunity to put distance between the thoughts we have and how we choose to act through conditioned responses and learned behaviors.

Instructions

1. Set aside a time to meditate. If you're a beginner to mindful meditation, then try to aim for five minutes at first, working your way up to fifteen-minute sessions.
2. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Inhale and exhale slowly, bringing your breathing under control.
3. When you are ready, and once your breathing is controlled, observe your thoughts in the present

moment. The aim of mindful meditation is not to quiet your mind, it is to pay attention to what is happening right now, in this moment.

4. Observe your thoughts and how they make you feel, and then let them go. Notice if any judgment arises but don't dwell on that judgment, let it go, and allow the next thought to enter your mind.
5. Come back to the present moment and let the next thought enter your mind, repeating steps 3 and 4.
6. End your mindful meditation session with compassion and self-love. Acknowledge that everyone has thoughts and that they are fleeting.
7. Refocus on your breath, inhaling and exhaling a few times before opening your eyes and ending your meditation.

Mindful meditation takes practice so don't be hard on yourself if you find that your sessions are short to begin with. Try to build slowly on how much time you are in a meditative state rather than judging yourself for not being able to meditate for a specific time.

Belly Breathing

I will cover deep breathing techniques in greater detail in a later chapter, but belly breathing and 4-7-8 breathing are great skills to learn at home to allow you to relax and regain control when you are feeling anxious or are in a panic attack.

Belly breathing, also known as diaphragmatic breathing, has been used for many years to aid relaxation, lower heart rate, and increase oxygen levels in the bloodstream.

As a beginner to belly breathing, it is a good idea to practice the technique laying down so that you don't accidentally hyperventilate or suffer from dizzy spells.

Instructions

1. Lie comfortably on your back on a flat surface like your bed or your sofa. Bend your knees and make sure that your head and neck are supported well.
2. When you are comfortable, place one hand on your chest near your heart, and your other hand below your rib cage where your diaphragm is.
3. Inhale slowly through your nose, feeling your chest, diaphragm, and belly moving under your hands. Take note of how much your lower and upper hands are moving, with the aim to have your upper hand move as little as possible.
4. Tighten your belly muscles, pulling your core inward as you exhale. Purse your lips to push the breath out of your body. Your lower hand should fall as you release your breath and your upper hand should still remain as still as you can keep it.
5. Repeat this process for about five minutes, or for as long as needed to feel calm and relaxed.
6. When you are done with your belly breathing exercises, remain in a seated or lying position for a couple of seconds to allow your body to readjust.
7. Slowly stand up, and be aware of any dizziness you experience. It is perfectly normal to have a little bit of an uneven feeling when you begin belly breathing.

4-7-8 Breathing

Developed by Dr. Andrew Weil, the 4-7-8 breathing technique is based on ancient yoga practices. This practice helps you to regain control over your breathing and your body.

It might take a little bit of time to get the hang of 4-7-8, but when practiced regularly, the technique is very effective in helping you to fall asleep, and to end panic attacks.

What 4-7-8 does is to refocus the mind, bringing its attention to regulating our breath rather than obsessing on thoughts.

Physiologically, the technique has been shown to bring down heart rate and blood pressure, and increase blood oxygenation levels. Doctors have dubbed 4-7-8 as a natural tranquilizer, and an effective treatment against anxiety disorders and insomnia.

Instructions

Before you begin to actually practice 4-7-8, it is a good idea to learn the mouth placements and movements required to effectively do the exercises.

To practice your mouth positioning, begin by focusing on your tongue's placement. Now move your tongue to the roof of your mouth, holding it in place behind your top, front teeth. This is where your tongue should stay for the entire duration of your breathing exercise which may sound simple enough but it is actually quite challenging.

Practice breathing in deeply, without your tongue moving, and then exhale without moving your tongue positioning.

Once you have the hang of your mouth positioning you can move on to the instructions below.

Instructions

1. Find a quiet spot where you will not be interrupted. Sit or lie down and get comfortable.
2. Position your tongue on the top of your mouth, resting against your top, front teeth.
3. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold your inhaled breath for seven seconds before releasing it slowly and in a controlled fashion through slightly parted lips. Your exhaled breath should make a whooshing sound.
4. Close your lips and inhale for four seconds, releasing your breath in the same way as step 3.
5. Inhale again through your nose, holding this breath for eight seconds this time before exhaling your breath through pursed lips.

Every time you inhale is a new cycle of breath. Practice this pattern for four full breath cycles working your way up to eight full breath cycles.

Frequently Asked Questions on Mindfulness

It's only natural to have questions before you make changes to your life, even if these changes are positive ones that support your health and mental wellbeing.

And certainly, I applaud a curious, questioning mind, as being curious is one of the core principles of mindfulness and meditation.

Here are some of the answers to questions you may have about mindfulness meditation.

1. Is any one type form of mindfulness or meditation better than the other specifically for OCD?

Studies haven't shown that any one form of mindfulness or that any specific technique works better than another. Some research suggests that incorporating three minutes of breathing exercises into your day will help to lower your anxiety but the only conclusive research is that which shows that mindfulness and meditation as a whole works for OCD.

The whole point of mindfulness and meditation is to find a practice or practices that work for you, and that fit well into your day.

2. How much time should I set aside to meditate or practice mindfulness?

Mindfulness and meditation practices vary in length and most practices will encourage you to set aside only as much time as you can remain focused, or for as long as you need to remain in a meditative state. Choose what works for you, and if you are new to mindfulness and meditation, start with manageable time, working your way up to longer sessions.

3. I have tried meditation and it triggered my OCD. Now what?

Sometimes, our minds can be stubborn or may become confused while in a state of meditation and mindfulness. If this has happened to you, and you are finding that your mindful meditation practices are triggering your OCD, have a chat with your therapist or healthcare provider. Sometimes it just takes a small tweak in your practice for your mind to choose to focus and let go of its usual behaviors.

Finally, despite our best efforts, certain techniques may not work. There is nothing wrong with you if you find that mindfulness and meditation are not working to relieve your symptoms. There are other techniques and tools you can use to overcome your OCD and live a more fulfilling life.

At Home Mindfulness Exercises

Modern living is frenetic, to say the least. For most of us, our mind is constantly being pulled from one thing to the next, and the result is scattered thoughts and emotions that run rampant.

The best of us will feel totally frazzled and stressed, and like we just don't have enough time in the day at least once a week. And, as you now know, being exposed to stress for prolonged periods of time is not particularly great for our mental or physical wellbeing.

If you don't have five minutes in a day to sit down and devote time to mindfulness or meditation, that's perfectly fine, I know I certainly don't.

What I did was find ways to incorporate mindfulness into my existing routine. This meant I didn't need to carve out time in an already hectic day to prioritize my mental health.

Sometimes we just need to become aware that everyone does have moments of pause throughout the day—getting our coffee, commuting to work on public transport, one of our meals throughout the day, or yet another work meeting that could have been an email. No? Okay disregard that last one—you get what I mean.

It is important to prioritize your mental health and your physical health so that you can achieve a mind-body balance, so let's look at some ways you could incorporate mindful practices into your life.

Mindful Breathing in Your Daily Routine

Mindful breathing can be done just about anywhere, standing up, or sitting down (although if you're a beginner it's a good idea to practice sitting down).

You can find a moment to be still and focus on your breath for a minute or two just about anywhere so the next time you feel rushed, anxious, stressed, or panicked make the concerted effort to stop and breathe.

Try mindful breathing on public transport, at your desk at work (or lock yourself into a restroom stall if you know you won't be left alone), while you are getting yourself something to eat or drink throughout the day, or while you are standing in a queue to pay for your groceries.

Don't forget to read the chapter on breathing techniques so that you can find a technique that is suited to you.

Daily Mindful Observation

Did you know that your brain is taking in every detail of what you are experiencing, whether you're aware of it or not?

Mindful observation forces us to switch off autopilot for a moment and become consciously aware of our surroundings in a positive, fulfilling way.

There really is so much beauty, strangeness, and wonder that surrounds us every single moment of every day if we take the time to notice it. When you choose to mindfully observe your environment, you are connecting with that environment and reminding yourself that we are all connected in some way or another.

The best thing about mindful observation is that it can be done anywhere at any time, and will help you to see that everything and everyone around us serves a purpose.

Instructions

1. Choose something in your immediate eyesight to focus on. Try to choose something natural, like an insect, person, a plant, cloud, or even your own hands.
2. To begin with, I don't want you to analyze it. Just notice that it is there, acknowledge it, and feel your body relax as your mind focuses on something other than the whirlpool of endless thoughts.
3. Try to see the object as a child would, with wonder, and as if it were the first time you were seeing it.

4. Now, allow your curiosity to take over. Explore the different aspects of the object. What does it look like? Does it make a sound? If it doesn't make a sound, what do you imagine it would sound like if you could hear the frequency it resonated on?
5. Imagine yourself connecting your energy with the object. How does its purpose connect with yours?

Take as much time as you want to connect with this object before disengaging and carrying on with your day.

Mindful Awareness

Mindful awareness exercises help you to become more aware and appreciative of the tasks we do every day without thinking about it.

Most of us take for granted the small, learned, things we do like putting on our shoes, or even pouring a glass of water. We tend to forget that there was a time in our lives when we had no idea how to perform these tasks and that we had to concentrate on every movement and the object itself to successfully complete what we set out to do.

Becoming mindfully aware can be extremely enlightening as it forces us not only to stop and think for a moment, but also helps us to appreciate certain things, like flavors and aromas again.

Being mindfully aware doesn't take much, and all you have to do is decide to be present, in a moment.

You may be eating, for example, and instead of mindlessly eating, you could choose to take the time to savor the textures, aromas, and flavors of the food you are eating. You could even

incorporate your sight, examining the food and visualizing it is nourishing your body and mind.

Similarly, you may choose to marvel at the technology you use at work, appreciating for a moment how all of the parts of your laptop work to create a machine that assists you in your daily work tasks.

Mindful awareness doesn't need to be something physical, though, and it can be directed to any negative thoughts you may be having too.

As you become more aware of your thoughts, you can catch yourself in a negative thought and choose to be mindfully aware of what you are thinking before visualizing yourself letting go of that thought.

You can choose to become mindfully aware right now, at this moment, stopping for a moment to appreciate your ability to read this book and to see the words on the page or on your device.

Mindful Listening Techniques

Mindful listening is the process of not just hearing what a person says, but listening to what they have to say without judgment and with the intent to understand them. When you can train your brain to hear, listen and understand what is being said, you rid yourself of bias and preconception, seeking rather to open yourself to the information being given to you.

So many of us listen to what others have to say and act upon our past experiences, and usually, we will fixate on the negative experiences rather than the positive ones.

To train yourself in mindful listening, try to begin with a sound or song that is associated with a negative memory. Play the sound and instead of allowing your mind to dwell on the negative experience and feelings, bring it to the present moment, and listen to it without judgment and with a neutral stance.

Instructions

Begin with a song that you don't know before moving on to something you do know.

1. Select a piece of music that you have never heard before.
2. Put your earphones in and sit in a comfortable spot.
3. Listen to the music and pay attention to what you are thinking. Don't label the music though—no genre, no artist, no identification of instruments. Simply listen to the song neutrally and allow yourself to hear the sounds being created.
4. Now, play the song again, but this time, explore all of the aspects of the track. Don't form judgment or an opinion of the song, just listen and explore with curiosity, allowing your body to move if you feel like it.
5. Finally, listen to the song again but this time, hone in on the voice and the lyrics being sung. Do the music lyrics marry up with each other? Can you separate the voice from the music?

The idea of mindful listening is to train your mind to listen to everything rather than listening to only some things. Once you are able to listen to music with mindfulness, you can move on to a song you do know, to a podcast, and finally, to the people you speak with every day.

Mindful Immersion Techniques

Mindful immersion helps you to learn to be content in a specific moment. It teaches us to take a moment away from the constant rat race, helping us to refocus on ourselves.

Becoming immersed in your life is really easy to do as it uses your daily duties and responsibilities as the tool to becoming mindful.

It teaches us that rather than rushing to complete our daily tasks, we should become aware of them, experiencing them in a way we haven't experienced before.

Let's take a mundane task like sweeping your home as an example. Instead of treating the task as a chore, you will choose to become mindful.

Instructions

1. Pick up your broom. Take note of how it feels in your hands. What muscles are you using to hold the broom?
2. Pick a spot to begin sweeping. Do you always start in this spot? If you do, pick a different spot and walk to that position.
3. Begin sweeping. Notice the sweeping motions of your arms and hands. Think about how you are part of the broom and how the broom is part of you, working in unison to clean an area.
4. Think about ways you could clean more efficiently and then put these ideas to the test.
5. Accept if you have made a mistake and acknowledge that the area is still clean.

The point of mindful immersion is to become creative and to discover how everyday tasks can still be changed into new experiences.

Instead of pushing through your daily tasks and finishing them while laboring and stewing because you have to get these things done, become aware of what you are doing and the progress you are making.

Exercises in Mindful Appreciation

Mindful appreciation is an exercise that can be done anywhere and is often recommended to help people pull themselves out of a panic attack.

To be mindfully appreciative, you will need to set aside a few minutes every evening to journal five things in your life or your day that would normally go unappreciated.

What those things are is entirely up to you, and it doesn't need to be a person, but can be actions, objects, or even the things that usually have you feeling overwhelmed or upset.

Mindful appreciation trains us to sit down at the end of every day and give thanks for the ability to do even the small, insignificant things in our life.

Instructions

1. Purchase or find a notepad or book that will be dedicated to your mindful appreciation exercise. You can even choose to have certain pens for the practice.
2. Sit down at the end of the day, before you go to bed, and think about your day.

3. Identify five things you can be appreciative of and write them down.
4. Now, examine each of these things and ask yourself the following questions:
 - Do I know how or why these things exist, or even how they work?
 - Have I ever acknowledged how having these things in my life have benefited me?
 - What would my life be like if I didn't have these things?
 - Is there anything you've never noticed about these things?
 - Is there a relationship or dependency you have formed on these things? If so, how are you and these things interconnected?

Do this exercise every day until you find yourself becoming mindfully appreciative without even having to sit down and think about it.

A Word on Diet and Exercise

Believe it or not, what you eat can have a profound effect on your mood. Part of your holistic treatment plan when you have OCD is examining your diet and making appropriate changes. Your practitioner and your therapist will discuss with you an eating and exercise plan that can help to ease your OCD symptoms.

I don't want you thinking that you need to go on a special diet or spend a fortune on foods that you wouldn't normally find at the store, but it is important that you understand just how

much of an effect what you eat and how you move your body can affect your mental state of being.

Those of us with OCD should focus on regular, small, nutritious meals to prevent sugar dips. Added to this, breakfast is super important as it ensures you are nourishing your body correctly to start the day.

What You Should Be Eating

Like I said, you don't need to be following strict, expensive diets, but nutrient-rich foods should become your go-to instead of junk and processed foods.

Opt for nuts and seeds that are nutrient-dense, proteins like beans, eggs, and lean meats that will feed your muscles and brains, and fruit, veggies, and whole grains that will stabilize your blood sugar levels.

Try to stay away from stimulants like caffeine that is found in tea, coffee, and energy drinks, and minimize how much soda you drink, replacing it with naturally flavored water, herbal teas, and watered-down fruit juices.

Lifestyle Changes

As you begin to nourish your body properly, certain lifestyle changes will happen naturally, while others you will need to work on to improve.

The first change you will notice is that your sleep will improve, and with better sleep comes a better mental state. To really maximize the quality of your sleep, try to institute a sleep

routine that will help you to drift off to sleep properly rather than tossing and turning waiting for sleep to find you.

It's a good idea to switch off all of your devices and the television 10 minutes before you sleep, replacing your screen time with relaxation practices like music, a warm shower or bath, and dim lighting.

A good sleep routine can do wonders for the quality of sleep you get and allows your mind to unwind at the end of a long day.

Try to incorporate some of your relaxation techniques and practices into your sleep hygiene routine so that your mind can focus on your body before bed rather than on its thoughts. Yoga, meditation, and breathing techniques are all good ways to center yourself before you go to sleep.

Another important aspect to consider is becoming active and allowing your body the chance to tire your mind out in the right way. Exercise produces cortisol, the body's stress hormone, in small doses. When you exercise regularly, you can desensitize your body to cortisol spikes and reduce your levels of anxiety.

Getting active is a great way to tire the body and mind, and your body will reap the benefits by becoming stronger and fit. This, in turn, instills a sense of self-confidence in your ability to do tough things and a confidence in how amazing your body is. And, as you exercise, you will see positive, measurable changes in your body that are a reminder that a little hard work can, and will, make incredible changes in your life. But I will explore the importance of exercise and OCD a little more in the next chapter.

Finally, learn to celebrate positive changes, no matter how small they are. It takes courage to live with OCD, and you need

to acknowledge that while not everything will work for you, some things will, and that is something worth celebrating.

Chapter 4: Why You Should Try Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) and Exercise

The attempt to escape from pain is what creates more pain. –Gabor Maté

Developed in the 1920s and published as an effective medical tool in the 1930s, PMR works by physically relaxing the muscles in the body so that the mind can achieve a state of calmness.

Developed by Dr. Edmond Jacobson, a physician in internal medicine and psychiatry, PMR was used by Jacobson to help his patients learn how to relax their muscles.

This was done by focusing on a specific muscle group, then tensing this muscle group before relaxing them.

PMR, like all other medical practices, have evolved through research, and more mental focus is placed on the release of tension, but the premise remains the same, and physicians and therapists alike still recommend the technique as part of a holistic wellness plan to treat a number of conditions.

Studies show that PMR is an effective treatment for everything from anxiety disorders to high blood pressure and digestive issues, and what makes the practice particularly great is that it is simple to learn.

That's right.

PMR is so simple that just about anyone can learn the technique, and with 10 minutes a day to practice the technique, most people can benefit from using PMR.

A quick search on the internet will show that there are many ways to practice PMR, and finding a technique and time frame that suits you is more important than the form of PMR itself.

For myself, practicing PMR before drifting off to sleep really helped to calm my mind and shut off the whirr of thoughts and the general loudness that resides in my brain.

What Science Says About PMR

In the 1920s and 30s, PMR was used to treat the anxiety associated with a number of psychiatric diseases.

Today, PMR is used to treat a wide variety of ailments including tension headaches, temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ), chronic back pain, high blood pressure, migraines, cancer pain, and high blood pressure, generalized pain relief, as well as a host of mental illnesses.

You should know that PMR is not a cure for these conditions by any means, but it does help to relieve the symptoms associated with chronic illnesses and pain, and science has shown that the technique has a 94% success rate in reducing stress and anxiety (Toussaint et al., 2021).

This astonishing success rate is why PMR is one of the go-tos for physicians and therapists, as it taps into the power of mind-body balance, and is a real option for people who prefer a non-pharmacological (chemical-free) option to treat their ailments.

Traditionally speaking, Western medicine has shunned more traditional, holistic approaches but with more and more researchers and doctors choosing to at least incorporate some of these age-old practices, the spotlight is once again on how effective gaining control of the mind and body can be.

In one study done, people with OCD reported that their anxiety and insomnia symptoms were greatly reduced by practicing just 10 minutes of PMR in the evening before they went to sleep, and a whole lot more said that taking a “time out” to practice the technique when they felt their compulsions coming on, helped to halt the need to act almost immediately (Toussaint et al., 2021).

Choosing to incorporate PMR into your at-home treatment plan comes with a host of benefits that extend beyond anxiety and insomnia relief, though, so let’s have a look at some of these.

The Benefits of PMR for OCD

Before I continue with the benefits and how-to of PMR, I would like to make it clear that PMR is not a cure for OCD or even anxiety.

PMR is a supplementary treatment that should be used in conjunction with other CBT therapies so that you are dealing with the cause of your OCD, desensitizing yourself to your triggers, learning to manage your actions, and effectively managing your anxiety.

The techniques used in PMR are designed to offer you temporary relief from the anxiety associated with OCD, but they do not address the other facets of your illness, and for you

to effectively manage your symptoms, you will need to commit to whatever therapies work for you.

PMR is usually used in conjunction with ERP therapies to help you to desensitize yourself from your triggers, and help you to manage your anxiety as a whole. PMR needs to be practiced regularly for it to be effective, and while this may sound like a chore, it's actually a blessing as it means you can learn to manage your stress across your entire lifespan and not just in the right now.

Having said that, it is absolutely critical that you incorporate PMR as an add-on to your treatment, rather than relying on the technique as your sole form of treatment.

Let me put it to you this way, you wouldn't purchase an expensive cellphone without buying a screen protector and adequate back protection cover.

PMR is not the cellphone, it is the additional protection you need to ensure your phone continues to work well and stays in pristine condition.

Right, now that you understand PMR's role in your treatment plan, we can look at some of the science-backed benefits it can offer you.

PMR as a relaxation technique has been shown to:

- reduce heart rate to a relaxed state
- reduce blood pressure to healthy parameters
- reduce breathing rate to prevent hyperventilation and panic
- improve bodily functions like digestion and metabolism

- control insulin and blood sugar levels
- reduce stress hormones like excessive cortisol in the body
- increase blood flow to major muscle groups
- reduce chronic tension and pain in the body
- improve focus
- improve mood
- improve sleep quality and lowers fatigue

Relaxation techniques are designed to be used with other positive lifestyle changes like mindfulness, gratitude, positive thinking, a healthy diet, and exercise.

It is a tool to help you manage your anxiety, not cure you of it, and when used for its intended purpose, will be one of the most powerful tools in your OCD management arsenal.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Guidelines

PMR is incredibly convenient and can be practiced standing up, seated, or lying down. For me personally, I prefer to practice either PMR and breathing exercises just before I go to sleep at night as a part of my bedtime routine.

Using PMR works best when you work towards some kind of script as it helps you to remain focused on the task at hand and ensures your mind doesn't randomly jump from one muscle group to the next.

I will supply you with two scripts that you can memorize, but if these don't work for you, there are a whole lot more on the internet, so find one that works for you.

The basic idea behind PMR is to progressively tense certain muscle groups before relaxing them while visualizing the tension, pain, and stress leaving your body.

When practiced regularly, PMR can be an effective tool in helping you to manage your stress, tension, any pain you may be feeling, and help you to reconnect your mind to your body.

Before you begin to consider using PMR, or any other exercise routine, you should consider some key points like whether or not you have any physical injuries, what your physician or therapist has suggested, and what your medical and mental wellness history is.

Always consult with your physician before starting any new wellness program.

Your Environment

You will need to decide where you would like to practice PMR when you are first learning the practice. I would suggest a comfortable space like an armchair or your bed. Make sure to wear loose clothing that doesn't irritate or constrict your body, and remove your shoes.

Opt for soft lighting if you are going to practice PMR but don't want to fall asleep, or have the lights off if you are intending to use PMR as a sleep aid, and make sure to remove anything that will distract you. This means cellphones, televisions, and music should be turned off.

You should already be avoiding stimulants like alcohol and caffeine before bed, but if you are not, then now is the time to stop. Try not to do PMR straight after a big meal as it may cause feelings of digestive discomfort.

Before you begin your script, be sure to check your body position, intentionally positioning yourself in the opposite way of how you would be if you were feeling stressed.

What to Do Before You Begin Your Script

Before you begin to follow your PMR script, make sure to mentally prepare yourself by following the guidelines below.

1. Have your script in your hand so that you know what to do next.
2. Make sure to start at either the top or the bottom of your body so that you are making your way either up or down your body. Targeted PMR can be practiced once you have the hang of the technique.
3. Take a few slow breaths before you begin so that you are in control of your breathing.
4. Make sure to focus on your breath when you feel your mind wandering.
5. Be prepared to tense a specific muscle group for between 15 and 20 seconds. I find it easier to hold my breath when focusing on a muscle group but you can choose whatever works for you.
6. Make sure to exhale and refocus on your breath when you release a muscle group.
7. Don't hold onto the tension you have created, release your muscles quickly.

8. Take 20 to 30 seconds between each muscle tense to focus on your breathing.
9. Repeat the process on each muscle group two or three times before moving on to the next.
10. Actively visualize the tension and pain leaving your body.
11. Pay attention to your body, and if tensing a specific muscle group is causing you intense pain, stop and move to the next area of your body.

Two Scripts for Effective PMR

PMR scripts make it easy for you to follow a specific guide, keeping your mind focused on the task at hand.

The two scripts below are designed to help you to relax.

Make sure to follow the guidelines above, and prepare your PMR space before you begin your practice.

PMR is called a practice for a reason, so if you don't get it right the first, second, or even tenth time, that is fine. Just keep trying and you will get the hang of it.

Beginners Top to Toe PMR Script

The following PMR script has nine steps you can follow. It begins at the top of your body but can be reversed to start at your toes too.

1. Furrow your forehead as if you are frowning. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
2. Squeeze your eyes closed as tightly as you can while pursing your lips and pressing your tongue to the roof of

- your mouth. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
3. Clench your jaw tightly, now smile broadly. Hold it for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 4. Push your head back gently, then lower your chin towards your chest. Shrug your shoulders upwards. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 5. Bend your arms to a 90-degree angle. Flex your biceps and extend your hands so that your fingers are pointing upwards. Ball your hands into a tight fist and release again. Do this action for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 6. Arch your spine to a comfortable tensed position. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 7. Squeeze your butt cheeks, then release them in a pulsing movement. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 8. Tighten your thigh, hamstring, and calf muscles. Flex your toes and point them upwards. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
 9. Curl your toes into a pointed position before flexing your toes upwards. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.

Refocus on your breathing for 30 seconds before disengaging from your PMR practice.

A More Advanced PMR Script

This more advanced PMR script disregards the top to toe or toe to top approach and, instead, begins with your hands and arms. It isolates individual body parts and will require more time to practice as it has 16 steps to follow, with each limb having its own dedicated time.

1. Make a fist with your right hand. Bend your elbow to 90 degrees bringing your balled fist to your shoulder in a bicep clench. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
2. Make a fist with your left hand. Bend your elbow to 90 degrees bringing your balled fist to your shoulder in a bicep clench. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
3. Bring your face forward so that your chin touches your chest. Hold for three seconds before moving your head back slowly so that your neck is bent backward. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
4. Open your mouth wide like you are about to yawn. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
5. Squeeze your eyes shut tightly and smile widely. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
6. Raise your eyebrows high. Hold for two or three seconds before furrowing your brow to frown. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.

7. Lower your neck towards your back and shrug your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
8. Push your shoulder blades backward so that they almost or do touch. Push your chest forward at the same time. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
9. Take a deep breath in, filling your lungs with air. Hold your breath for 15 seconds if you are able to before exhaling deeply.
10. Squeeze your butt muscles tightly. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
11. Tense your right thigh and hamstring, making sure not to tense your calf. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
12. Tense your left thigh and hamstring, making sure not to tense your calf. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
13. Curl the toes of your right leg upwards to tense your calf. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
14. Curl the toes of your left leg upwards to tense your calf. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.
15. Curl your toes on your right foot into a pointed position before flexing your toes upwards. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.

16. Curl your toes on your left foot into a pointed position before flexing your toes upwards. Do this movement for 15 to 20 seconds before releasing your muscles. Repeat two or three times.

Always remember that practice when changing your life positively will always lead to progress. With PMR, it is vitally important that you take the time to make a mental note of how your body responds to stress and tension, and how you feel after you have relaxed your muscles.

Your body will take time to learn how to respond to stress proactively. Be patient and have some compassion for yourself as you go through the process of learning.

Becoming Active to Manage OCD

I don't need to tell you that exercise is beneficial to your physical health but some studies suggest that exercise and activity can help to reduce the symptoms of OCD and other mental health issues (Sharma et al., 2006).

Exercise changes your brain, and helps your brain to develop new connections between its neurons. These new connections facilitate learning, which is good news for you as you will be learning a whole lot of new tools to help you manage your OCD.

Growth and positive change will have your brain produce the feel-good hormone in your brain, ensuring your mood is boosted, and that you reduce your stress levels.

What I love about exercise is that you can feel and see the changes happening with your body, and all of this is a physical reminder that, with some hard work and effort, you can change

your life. And, when you are able to see the difference from the efforts you are putting in, your self-confidence is boosted, helping you to believe that you really are in control of making positive changes in your life.

Specialized exercise groups for OCD sufferers allow you to build a healthy support system and allow you the opportunity to be more social. Even if you don't join a specialized group, getting out to the gym, or having a workout buddy will still allow you to touch base with other people.

One of the things I enjoy most about exercise is that it gives me the opportunity to distract my mind from whatever it chooses to obsess on, focuses my thoughts on something positive, and tires me out. It gives me a welcome break from the stresses of the day and allows me to manage my anxiety symptoms in a way that is beneficial to my mind and my body.

What Precautions You Should Take

Anyone who starts a new exercise routine will need to make sure that they take a few precautions to prevent injury and to minimize risk.

Before you begin any exercise routine, you should consult with your physician to rule out any underlying physical issues you have.

Also, I want you to get rid of the notion that exercise needs to be either difficult or painful for it to be beneficial. Exercise should be done in moderation and safely, especially if you are just starting out. You can always increase the intensity, duration, or frequency of your workouts as you progress.

I've put together a checklist for you before you choose to begin your workout to ensure you are exercising safely.

- Always use the proper equipment. This means using the right shoes, and comfortable clothing.
- Make sure that you balance your fitness program. This means incorporating aerobic exercise with strength training, and flexibility routines.
- Eat a proper, balanced diet to ensure you are fueling your body with the right kind of nutrients that support muscle and neuron growth.
- Always warm up before you start your workout. If you are not joining an exercise group at a gym or community center, make sure to stretch. Warming up makes sure that your heart rate increases slowly and that you don't accidentally pull a muscle or hurt your joints.
- Stretch after your workout too! Make sure to hold each of your stretches for at least 20 seconds so that you can release any tension build-up in your muscles.
- Build your workout. It's important to take your time when exercising. Expecting yourself to be able to run a marathon, or lift heavy weights right away is unrealistic and will have you hurting yourself.
- Breathe! Make sure to focus on your breathing as you go through each of your movements. Not only does this help to lower your blood pressure while you work out, but it will ensure that you remain focused on the task at hand.
- Make sure to stay hydrated before, during, and after your workout so that you don't accidentally dehydrate yourself.
- Take the time to cold down after you have exercised. Cooling down is just as important as warming up. This

can be done by taking a 10-minute slow walk or stretching for the same amount of time.

- Rest in between your exercise routine. You don't have to have an intense workout every single day. Opt for moderate exercise routines rather than super intensive exercise every day.

Living in the Moment Through Exercise

Exercise is a fantastic way to learn to live in the right now. It doesn't allow our thoughts to overwhelm us because we need to focus on the movement of our body rather than the things rushing through our minds.

Mindfulness through movement and exercise comes naturally, and unlike meditation, it doesn't really take much effort other than getting up off the couch and actually working out.

But sometimes, OCD can even creep into our exercise routines, and you may find yourself obsessing about whether you are performing the actions correctly, if you are working out for the right length of time, or even when you will see results.

These thoughts are normal, and I guarantee you that every single person who has ever started a new exercise program has had them.

So how do you make sure that you don't begin to obsess about the thing that is meant to help us relieve our symptoms and help us regain some control of our lives?

The answer really isn't as complex as you may think it is.

The key to any big change is to start small. You cannot expect yourself to completely overhaul your entire lifestyle

immediately, and if you do, you are only setting yourself up for failure. The trick to setting any goal is to not aspire to the end result but to set milestones that you can focus on.

Try to begin with something small, like walk 5000 steps today or do a 20-minute workout.

If you achieve your milestones, you will inevitably achieve your goals, so think of what the next step is and not the bigger picture.

While you are working out, notice the sensory details in the movements you are making. What muscles are you working? Are they contracting? How well are you controlling your breathing?

Focusing on your senses will help keep your mind focused on what needs to be done rather than on what needs to be done correctly. For example, if you are squatting and you feel your glutes and thighs working, then you are doing the move correctly. There will be plenty of time to fine-tune your technique later.

If you do feel like your mind is wandering, or fixating on your thoughts, choose to gently redirect your thought patterns. This is about the only time that a counting compulsion comes in handy.

Gently acknowledge the thoughts you are having and then opt to rather count your reps. Make sure to mix it up counting forward and backward as you move through each movement. You could even choose to run or walk a certain amount of steps before rewarding yourself with a break.

The point is to gently redirect your thoughts after acknowledging them rather than giving up your routine altogether.

And I am sure you're going to be tired of reading this by the time you're done with my book, but celebrate your victories.

Living in the moment is not easy, and it is especially challenging when you're fighting a low or grumpy mood. Learn to celebrate the positive things you have done for yourself, no matter how small those things may seem.

Practicing gratitude extends to having gratitude for yourself and for the amazing, strong, and capable body and mind you have. Celebrating your victories allows you to feel good in the moment and reinforces the good behaviors you are practicing so that they become an excellent habit in your life.

You can absolutely take a moment to be grateful for taking proactive steps for your mental and physical well being. In fact, I implore you to do exactly that after every workout because you deserve to be proud of yourself and of your achievements.

Exercise affords us the opportunity to let go of perfection, and to focus on the absolute marvel that is our mind and body. It instills confidence in us knowing that our mind and body can work together to create an outcome, and it gives you the chance to generate results you can see and feel, every single time you choose to exercise.

What Aerobic Exercise Does for Your Physical and Mental Health

Exercise is not just about slimming down and having a healthy body. Sure, it helps, but what motivates people to get active and stay active goes far beyond looking good.

When we exercise regularly, our sense of well being increases.

Now the reasons for this may seem superficial in that our bodies change but the physiological changes that happen are only the tip of the iceberg.

When we choose to remain active, over time, our energy levels balance out, we sleep better and we seem to be able to handle stress a lot more effectively. All of this means exercise is working not just on our bodies but on our minds too.

A lot of research has been done into the profound positive impact exercise has on mental illnesses, and exactly how much activity needs to be included for us to begin to reap these benefits. And while research is ongoing, almost all studies have come back applauding exercise as one of the best natural “medicines” in the treatment of mental illness.

For those who suffer from depression, for example, exercising just 15 minutes a day reduces the symptoms associated with it and reduces the severity of these symptoms by a median of 26%.

Anxiety is also reduced when exercising for a minimal period of time per day, and when mindfulness practices are included in workout routines, the symptoms associated with anxiety disorders decreased significantly (Greer et al., 2016).

The reasons exercise can improve symptoms of mental illness are rooted in science and the way in which our brain and body interact with each other.

Feelings of well being are a direct result of a release of endorphins, the chemical in our brain that makes us feel good and energized. But that is not all that happens when we choose to be active.

As the body becomes healthier, and we begin to feel our mood change, the brain begins to facilitate neural growth, and this growth lays down the pathway for new information to be retained in our memory.

You see, for a habit to form, regardless of whether the habit is positive or not, the brain must feel that it is being rewarded. In the case of exercise, the habit formation would look something like this:

Cue or trigger—it's 7 AM, time to go for my walk.

Action or behavior—put on your running shoes and walk for 15 minutes.

Reward—a release of endorphins which make us feel great.

Every habit requires these three components, and positive habits that demonstrate physical growth and development are more likely to stick.

Knowing how we form habits is important because we need to know that habits are never truly forgotten or broken.

The brain is not capable of forgetting information, and just because you can't recall something doesn't mean it's not there, locked in a vault somewhere in your subconscious.

Remember I asked you to think of your mind as a giant supercomputer?

Building new neural pathways through exercise and mindfulness allows your supercomputer to download new software that will help it to perform more efficiently. And just like a regular computer, old software is not rewritten but overwritten, which means you can always revert back to the old version if you make that choice.

This is why consistent exercise is important. Because it gives us the opportunity to keep upgrading and to make sure we are happy with the newer versions of ourselves instead of choosing to revert back to an older version.

The great thing about exercise is that there is such a wide variety of options available to you, each of which can benefit you mentally and physically, and some don't even need you to carve out a large portion of your day to get done.

Simple But Effective Exercises You Can Do at Home

If you're new to exercise, remember it is important to start small and build your intensity and the duration of your workouts.

Exercises like yoga, which help to release tension in your muscles, and focus your mind, deep back stretching to release stress that is held in your back and shoulders, and deep breathing are all great exercise starting points.

When incorporated with a 15-minute daily mindful walk, these exercises really can help you to focus your mind on positive growth rather than obsessive thoughts.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week to reap the benefits of being healthy. Now this may sound like a lot of time but when we break it down into smaller, more manageable increments, it equates to only 21 minutes of exercise every day.

A functional exercise schedule may look like this:

- 10 minutes of yoga in the morning
- 15 minute walk in my lunch hour, or after work
- 10 minutes of stretching and deep breathing before bed

When we break down the exercise into smaller, more manageable segments, it becomes more realistic for you to fit a full 20 minutes of activity into your day, or even more time.

Becoming active happened more by accident for me. I remember a couple of years ago walking early in the morning—begrudgingly might I add, but the dog demanded it. Every morning I would see a gentleman stretching, sprinting, and shadow boxing in a specific area of the park, and I always wondered what it was that had him up so early with such energy and enthusiasm.

Curiosity got the best of me eventually, and one day I plucked up the courage to ask him. He explained that he had experienced a home invasion earlier that same year, and the event had left him with PTSD. He had been wracked with fear, knowing that if he ever had to face an issue that was more dangerous than that, he would have been too weak, and too

slow to fight back. This realization had him locked in his home for weeks until he decided to take back some control of his life.

He downloaded an app that would teach him strength and endurance, and stuck to it, despite the fact that he was really unfit, and went on to tell me how he feels less fear, and less anxiety, getting out of the house and living a usual life now that he exercises daily.

I thought that was inspiring, and I decided to take a leaf out of his book, and I woke up earlier the next morning to take the dog out for a walk. With a fresh perspective, I walked for 20 minutes instead of the minimum 10 for the dog to do its business. Before I knew it, I was walking for 30 minutes in the morning, then jogging, and now I jog for 30 minutes every day morning and night, much to my dog's delight.

My point is, you don't have to disrupt your life. Start small, but do start so that you can start to regain some control of your life.

Chapter 5: Breathing Techniques to Relieve Stress and Anxiety

If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment, live in the breath. –Amit Ray

Chances are that you don't think of your breathing very often, unless it is in an obsessive episode where even the sound of your own breathing can feel overwhelming.

Our breath is consistent, it's always there, working in the background to keep us among the land of the living.

But our breathing can be affected by a whole lot of different factors including stress, and when we are feeling anxious and stressed, breathing tends to become shallow and irregular.

Stress and tension have a direct physiological effect on our body, tensing and tightening muscles, and since our respiratory system relies on muscle activity, stress restricts our ability to breathe efficiently.

Deep breathing (diaphragmatic breathing) and other breathing techniques teaches us how to not only become aware of our breath in a positive way, but allows us to release tension and flood our body with oxygen.

When we halt the process of anxiety and stress, we can effectively reduce our stress levels, refocus our mind, and release our body of pain.

You may think that breathing is just a bodily function, but how we breathe has a direct effect on our body's stress responses.

Have you ever tried to hold your breath under water, only to realize you may have held it for a little too long?

If you have, you will know that, by the time your head breaks the surface of the water, you will gasp for air and will feel panicky, and perhaps even a little fearful. The reason this happens is not only because you have deprived your body of oxygen for a period of time, but because oxygen calms the brain.

You may be saying, “well I don’t go about my day dunking my head under water to see how long I can hold my breath,” and you would be right in a literal sense, but when you consider that stress and anxiety causes you to take short, shallow breaths, it makes more sense as to why you begin to feel panicky when you are stressed.

In fact, if you had to force yourself to take these short, shallow breaths, even in a state of calm, you would quickly descend into a panic attack.

Stress essentially slowly drowns us by depriving us of life-giving oxygen, and for those with OCD, anxiety and stress are part of daily life.

It should therefore make sense that just breathing has the ability to pull us out of a stressed or panicked state, but it’s a little more complicated than that.

The Science of Breathing and How it Works

For you to understand how controlled, deep breathing helps us to relieve anxiety, I need to first give you a quick biology lesson.

The human body is made up of eleven organ systems. The system that controls involuntary actions like breathing, digestion, heart rate, etc, can be split into two separate systems—the sympathetic nervous system, which controls your emotions and fight or flight responses, and your parasympathetic nervous system, which controls your brain and body when it is in a rest or relax response.

The systems in your body are never dormant, and will always be active, but by doing certain things you can calm or increase the responses of these systems. These actions are called modulations.

Now your body is in a perpetual state of flux, or undulation, which is not necessarily a bad thing if it is controlled or modulated.

Think of your body as a tub of water. If you modulate the flow of water into the tub, the ripples and undulations are controlled, whereas if you pour water into the tub haphazardly or too quickly, the undulations will be uncontrollable and water will splash out all over the place.

Breathing techniques are you keeping those undulations under control through modulated behavior, which, in turn, helps you to dull the sympathetic system so that your anxiety doesn't splash out all over the place.

Biology lesson aside, hopefully, you have a better understanding of how anxiety disorders like OCD occur.

Because physicians and researchers know that it is these modulations and undulations that are the direct cause of stress responses in the human body, they have keenly studied which

modulations work best to keep the sympathetic system in check.

And, in case you hadn't guessed it yet, breathing techniques have come out tops in naturally treating stress and panic responses.

In one of these studies, a group of OCD patients were taught how to incorporate breathing techniques into their daily routines and when to use these techniques. It is important to note that all of these patients were medicated but not all were actively attending therapy.

Of these ten patients, half continued using medication but reported that they were better able to control their symptoms; 25% reported that they had stopped using their medication altogether as it was no longer necessary to treat their symptoms, and the other 25% reported that they had halved their medication dosage with the aim of weaning themselves off of chemical treatment.

All patients in the study reported that their symptoms were under control while using breathing techniques and all but one said that their impulse control had significantly improved (Shannahoff-Khalsa., et al. 1996).

And this is nowhere near the only study done on the effects of breathing techniques for OCD management either. The majority of these studies show at least a 50% reduction in the symptoms of the condition.

Breathing Basics

You now know that breathing incorrectly will upset the carbon dioxide and oxygen balance in your body. This imbalance will cause feelings of anxiety and panic, as well as emotional and physical issues.

Proper breathing techniques and deep breathing practices will help you manage your stress and anxiety and there is no shortage of breathing techniques out there for you to choose from.

Before you choose which type of breathing technique suits your needs, you will need to know a few things.

Tips Before Your Begin

Make sure to start slowly, choosing an easy technique that you can build up to. You will need to take the time to condition your nervous system. Remember, you're not going to run a marathon if you haven't yet conditioned your body and mind to run a mile.

Try to start at one or two minutes and concentrate on your technique, breathing through your diaphragm and lower belly, depending on which practice you have chosen.

Breathing techniques are not about doing something right or wrong. The point is to focus on your breath and pay attention to how efficiently you are breathing so that you can learn to calm your sympathetic nervous system.

If you need to break it down even further, breathing techniques are about flooding your body with oxygen so that you can rid yourself of build-ups of carbon dioxide.

Finally, make sure to pick breathing practices that fit in with your lifestyle. You don't have to put yourself in a situation where you are having to disrupt your life to incorporate a practice.

I will outline a couple of easy-to-integrate, and easy-to-modify techniques to help get you started, but if none of these are for you, feel free to combine them, or find something that does work for you.

Breathing Techniques You Can Learn

What makes breathing techniques great is that you don't need to attend specific classes to learn how to do them.

Each of the techniques I have outlined for you below comes with a set of benefits and can be easily integrated into your daily wellness practices.

Misogi Breathing

Also known as purification through breathing, misogi is used by a host of martial artists to center and focus themselves during their sporting practice. Originating from Japan, misogi breathing is an incredibly effective way to focus your mind and remain calm when feelings of anxiety wash over you.

To begin with, it is a good idea to practice misogi breathing in a seated or kneeling position. Later, you can add this breathing technique to your tai chi or other mindful movement practices.

Directions

Sit or kneel in a comfortable position. Close your eyes or focus on one spot and take a moment to focus on your breathing before you follow the steps below. Try to aim for a 3-minute session to begin with before working your way up to longer periods of time.

- Bring awareness to your breath, but don't change your breathing patterns yet. Just sit and focus on how you are breathing.
- Now, shift your focus to controlled breathing, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Perform this action five to ten times.
- Next, make a “hahhh” sound every time you exhale through your mouth.
- Once you have the hang of this, begin to visualize your breath as a small circular cloud moving in through your nose as you inhale, and out through your mouth as you exhale.
- Do this for three minutes and slowly extend your practice time.

If you find that your thoughts begin to enter into your mind while you are practicing your breathing, acknowledge them and then gently redirect your mind to the soft cloud you are inhaling and exhaling.

Alternating Breath

Alternating breathing is a technique that is used when practicing yoga, but that doesn't mean that you can't isolate it from yoga and practice it as a stand-alone wellness technique.

For those who have comorbid OCD and panic disorders, alternating breath is very effective in helping to regain control.

Alternating breath is done by breathing by inhaling and exhaling through your nose and not your mouth, which may take some getting used to so be patient with yourself.

Again, the technique can be practiced anywhere, but I suggest you start by learning how to alternating breathe in a seated position.

Directions

Start by sitting comfortably. Focus on your breath for a few seconds.

- Exhale out deeply through your nose.
- Now place a finger on your right nostril and inhale through the left one.
- Release your right nostril and exhale.
- Place your finger on your left nostril now and inhale through your right one.
- Release your right nostril and exhale.
- Continue to repeat this pattern for three minutes.

Once you are done with your session, recenter yourself, and focus on your breathing for a few seconds before slowly getting up.

Basic Breathing Technique

If a set script or type of breathing technique is not for you, you could try to incorporate basic breathing techniques into your daily routine. Or, if you like, you can amalgamate the basic breathing techniques listed below so that you have your own, customized plan that works for you.

These basic techniques are designed to help you manage your anxiety, regulate your heart rate, and even assist with digestion issues.

Breath Observation

Take a seat and get comfortable. Close your eyes, or focus on a specific spot.

Slowly, and mindfully, bring your attention to your breath. Observe your breathing through each breath cycle. Are there any changes in the way you are breathing? Acknowledge these changes and let them go, refocusing on your breath.

Try to sit and focus on your breathing for three minutes.

Be gentle on yourself, and practice self-compassion if your thoughts intrude, and if they do, refocus and come back to your breath.

Learn to Inhale and Exhale Correctly

Breathing is a continuous process, it only ends when our life ends. Our breath doesn't begin with inhalation and ends with exhaling, and it's important that you reframe your thinking when it comes to breathing techniques.

Directions

- Get comfortable in a seated position or lie down.
- Focus your attention on your breath for a few seconds.
- Now, draw your focus to your inhaling breath. Feel the oxygen enter into your lungs, noticing the muscles that are working to help you breathe.
- Exhale deeply, contracting your diaphragm and pushing out the air in your lungs. Visualize the carbon dioxide leaving your body.
- Inhale again, repeating the process.

The premise of learning to inhale and exhale correctly is to force out as much carbon dioxide as you can because the more waste you expel from your lungs, the more oxygen you will draw into your body.

You can always incorporate a technique called “allowing yourself to be breathed” in which you visualize the universe blowing breath into your lungs every time you inhale.

Alternatively, you could try to take a stimulating breath in which you alternate your deep breaths with rapid breathing through your nose and out of your mouth for a few seconds.

Relaxing Breath Technique

Relaxing breath techniques are some of the easiest to do, and follow a more traditional meditation style.

They can be incorporated into your mindfulness or yoga practices or can be done before bed to help your mind and body to relax.

Directions

- Get into a comfortable position.
- Focus on your breath for a moment before placing your tongue on the roof of your mouth, resting against your top front teeth.
- Close your mouth and inhale silently through your nose, counting to four before releasing your breath through your nose for seven seconds.

If you are having an issue with controlling your breath with your tongue resting on the roof of your mouth, relax and try to purse your lips, in a kissing position.

Try not to get too caught up in the technicalities, to begin with, rather focus on your breath.

Digestive Breathing

Believe it or not, breathing techniques can help to promote digestion and relieve you of discomfort associated with digestive issues.

You will need to use your hands to stimulate energy points in your body while concentrating on your breathing, which can be a little bit difficult to get the hang of, to begin with.

Directions

- Take a seat in a firm chair. Make sure your spine is straight, and that your feet are flat on the floor in front of you.
- Place your hands on your kneecaps, palms facing downward, fingers pointing towards your feet.

- Press your middle finger on your kneecap, and your index and ring fingers on either side of your kneecaps.
- Take a moment to feel the pressure coming from your fingertips.
- Now close your eyes and inhale deeply.
- Feel your lungs fill with life-giving oxygen.
- Exhale, contracting your belly to press the air out.

Repeat your breathing for three minutes before releasing the pressure on your knees. Take a moment to recenter yourself before standing up.

Controlled Breathing

Controlled breathing has its roots in traditional Indian meditation practices and it is an effective stress management tool. As you now know, your breathing will become more shallow and far faster when you are experiencing stress which triggers all sorts of not so great physical responses.

Controlled breathing gives you the opportunity to stop and regain some control, bringing you to a more relaxed state of being.

Directions

- Find a quiet spot where you can sit comfortably.
- Close your eyes or focus on a specific spot, drawing your attention to your breathing.
- Focus on each part of your body, using your ERP method to release the tension in your muscles.
- Now, inhale slowly and deeply. Make sure to inhale for a full five seconds or more.

- Do not hold your breath but release it, exhaling slowly for a full five seconds or more.

Aim for three to five minutes of deep breathing time at first, working your way up to 10-minute sessions.

The Kaiser Permanente's Deep Breathing Technique

The Kaiser Permanente method is specifically designed for stress management. This method is one of the few that insists you practice it for 2 to 3 minutes several times a day to really feel the benefits.

Before you begin this technique, make sure to find a quiet spot where you will not be disturbed.

Directions

- Find a place to sit or lie down comfortably. Be aware of your posture and make sure to maintain a straight spine.
- Place your hands on your chest so that you can feel your lungs expand and contract as you breathe.
- Now, inhale slowly through your nose for a count of four.
- Feel your chest rise as you fill your lungs with air before exhaling slowly through your mouth. Keep exhaling until you count to eight.
- Allow your body a moment to adjust and feel the tension leaving your body.
- Repeat this process for two to three minutes.

The Kaiser Permanente method of breathing is very effective but can cause you to feel dizzy. Be sure to remain seated or lying down for a minute or two after practicing this technique to prevent feelings of dizziness and nausea.

Breath of Life Technique

The breath of life technique combines visualization and deep breathing.

This technique is incredibly relaxing, so find a comfortable spot where you can lay down and raise your knees to remove any strain from your back.

Close your eyes, or find a spot to gaze at but try not to fixate or focus.

Once you feel relaxed, take a few slow, deep breaths.

Feel your stomach rise and fall with each breath in and out. Pay attention to every breath, pausing before each new breath you take.

Once you have established a good, smooth rhythm in your breathing, you can begin to visualize the universe filling your body with cleansing air with every breath in.

Begin to count as your exhale; one, and inhale again, allowing the universe to fill your lungs. Two, exhale...

Keep your rhythm and count through your breaths until you reach four and then take a moment to feel yourself detach from the universe to return to your life, in control of your thoughts.

If you like, you can end your breathing session with a mantra, or by expressing your gratitude for the breaths you take.

Autogenic Breathing

Autogenic breathing relies on your mind's ability to visualize the muscles in your body relaxing. Through research, the developer of this technique, Johannes Schultz, discovered that just by imagining your arms and legs becoming heavy while you breathe in warmth can help to dramatically reduce stress.

Directions

Find a comfortable spot to lie down or sit. Take a few deep, slow breaths before you begin.

- Close your eyes and imagine you are on a beach. See the seagulls flying overhead, hear the ocean waves lapping on the shore, and smell the salty air.
- Draw your focus to the waves. See them ebb and flow—rolling up onto the beach and then returning to the ocean.
- Feel the sand on your back, its warmth against your skin.
- Imagine digging your hands and feet into the sand, its warmth and weight covering your limbs slowly.
- Breathe in deeply, releasing your tension as you exhale.
- Notice your breath and how it coincides with the sound of the waves coming to the shore.
- Every time you breathe in, think of the word heavy and feel the weight of your arms and legs covered in the warm sand of the beach.

Try to stay in this state for five full minutes before you start to free yourself from the sand, coming back to reality.

Alternatively, try to practice this technique before you sleep at night so that you can drift off.

Complete Breath Exercise

Complete breath exercises originate from India and include a technique called full-lung breathing.

Directions

- Sit or stand in a comfortable position. Make sure you are grounded and safe.
- Slowly exhale through your nose, emptying your lungs to the best of your ability.
- Tuck in your belly as tightly as you can and hold this position for a count of five.
- Now, inhale through your nose, pushing your abdomen out, letting fresh oxygen fill your lungs completely.
- Raise your shoulder in a shrug position and hold them there for a count of five before slowly exhaling again
- Repeat this breath cycle for a maximum of ten times before disengaging.

Breathing techniques are great for reducing stress, anxiety, and panic, and can be used as an effective tool for managing the symptoms of your OCD. Better yet, they can be done just about anywhere and can help you feel like you are more in control of your health in a few minutes.

When used together with other stress management tools, breathing reduces the symptoms of OCD significantly and may even free you of medications. It also prepares your mind for cognitive reframing and helps you to begin to live with a positive mindset that encourages healing and growth.

Chapter 6: Cognitive Restructuring—Reframing Your Thoughts

Whatever a person frequently thinks and reflects on, that will become the inclination of their mind. —Gautama Buddha

Breaking a habit is tough, especially when we're thinking about the same thing over and over again.

Overcoming your bad habits can be done, though, and when you change your mindset to one that says you're not breaking anything but rather replacing it with something better and healthier for you, it becomes easier for you to heal.

Most of us will experience some form of negative thought pattern from time to time, but it's important to be aware that these thought patterns can become so entrenched in our minds that they will cause a bias, and a negative bias can affect everything from your well being to your success.

What Is Cognitive Restructuring and How Can It Help You?

Cognitive restructuring is the core of CBT, and it seeks to reframe our thoughts without trying to uncover why we are thinking what we are.

It accepts the notion that thoughts are not rational most of the time, but that they can affect our mental health, throwing us into depression and anxiety.

When undergoing CBT, you will work with your therapist to uncover what thought patterns are not great and what may be contributing to triggering these thought patterns. Once this is done, you will begin your work to reshape or reform those negative thought patterns.

This can be a bit of a difficult process at times because it can be difficult to undo our biases. Think about it this way, if you have spent your entire life believing the sky is red, and you are presented with evidence that it is in fact blue, it will take some time to reframe what you once believed.

Cognitive restructuring seeks to help you in identifying and deconstructing your negative thoughts, replacing them with a more balanced, positive way of thinking, and that is great news for those of us with OCD.

Our cognitive biases are rooted in our cognitive distortions and in our thought processes surrounding these distortions so the first thing you will need to do is identify what maladaptive thoughts you are having in the first place.

If you are given definitive proof that your thoughts are faulty, then you can seek to change them and take action.

But, how do you reframe your thoughts?

Cognitive Restructuring at Home

Your therapist will have an active hand in your cognitive restructuring process, but this doesn't mean you cannot employ some techniques at home to improve your thinking habits.

While your therapist can certainly help you to identify and explain which of your thoughts are irrational, they cannot be an active participant in challenging those thoughts outside of presenting you with the facts.

And this is where it is important that you invest in your own cognitive restructuring treatment so that you can redesign your thoughts to more positive, healthy ones that are beneficial to your life.

Cognitive restructuring can be a challenge, but the processes used to reprogram your thoughts are not.

Let's take a look at these processes.

Self-Monitoring of Your Thoughts

It would seem logical that the first step in changing a thought pattern is to first identify what that thought pattern is. When you have OCD, you are at a distinct advantage over other people because you already know what thoughts make you feel uncomfortable and what drives you to compulsive behaviors.

Through mindful practices, it becomes easier to monitor these thoughts, jot them down, and let them go, but when you begin to reframe thoughts, it's important that you ultimately challenge them.

So, identification of thoughts is easy for us, but knowing why they have popped into our heads is a bit more tricky.

Those of us with OCD have a tendency to become so fixated on the thought itself that we don't notice the trigger. While ERP will certainly help with immediate triggers, you need to find out what psychological triggers are driving you to your thoughts.

And here's the thing, we are often our own worst saboteurs not because what we think is going to happen is a possibility, but because we catastrophize our situations so much that the anxiety we generate is enough to ensure we fail.

Your thoughts and your words have power.

Never forget that.

To self-monitor your thoughts, begin a journal, whether digital or paper, and note your thoughts. If you're in the throws of a particularly tough OCD flare-up, take the time daily to notice your cognitive distortion patterns.

Otherwise, take some quiet time once a week to really sit down and analyze what thoughts are creating negative patterns.

Question Your Bias and Assumptions

Some of us are taught from a very early age to test our assumptions and to question our biases, which is great, except sometimes circumstances prove that our biases are fact, even if that fact is only an isolated incident.

When scientists research a subject, they always look at the median, or average for a reason—because there will always be

one or two variables that will lead to a negative outcome, and sometimes no matter how right you do something, it will fail.

But failure is not always catastrophic, and when our assumptions get in the way of living a healthy, productive life, we need to question them.

Always remember that your nonconscious, non-purposeful thoughts are almost always going to be biased or illogical. That's the way your brain is wired.

It's important that you ask yourself questions like

1. Am I thinking based on fact, bias, or emotion?
2. Is there irrefutable evidence that my thoughts are accurate?
3. Have I or would I ever do what my thoughts are telling me?
4. What other information is there I can use to dispute this thought?
5. Is this really a black or white situation?

You see, your thoughts talk “at” you, not with you, and by challenging your thoughts, you open a two-way dialogue with your mind.

Go back to the red sky example I gave you.

If someone told you the sky was red and you knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was, in fact, blue, you would open a dialogue, presenting facts to affirm the sky was blue. You wouldn't immediately subscribe to the other person's thought process that the sky was red, and you certainly wouldn't let the fact that someone disagreed with you halt your life.

Challenge your thoughts, because more times than not, the sky isn't red!

Learn to Perform a Cost Analysis of Your Thoughts

It's important to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of the choices you make, and weighing up these pros and cons happens every moment of the day, whether you're aware of it or not.

So why not bring this cost analysis to the forefront of your mind as a way to challenge your thought?

Ask yourself:

1. How do my thoughts affect me emotionally?
2. How do my thoughts affect me practically?
3. Are there long-term consequences for these thoughts?
4. Does this thought pattern affect my relationships?
5. Am I being limited by this thought pattern?

A cost analysis gives you a unique insight into how your thoughts have a profound impact on your life if you allow them to.

These negatively impactful thoughts are what we call limiting beliefs, and these are the thoughts you need to begin to replace.

Often we make decisions based on our thoughts that we believe will have a positive outcome but in the end, the trade-off is far too harmful or high, and we destroy our own lives because we're bogged down in perfection or successfully avoiding harm.

Reframe Your Thoughts

Now comes the fun part.

Actually reframing your thought.

Have you ever wondered why some people are mega-successful? Or why some people can graduate from a mediocre life to something amazing?

There has been a lot of research and speculation into why some people are more successful than others and while there are, what feels like, hundreds of tips and tricks out there to become successful, the one that makes the most sense is that they remove their limiting beliefs and thoughts.

In other words, they replace their limiting thoughts and behaviors with alternative explanations.

When you reframe your thoughts, you change your beliefs, and when you change your beliefs, you are changing your actions.

Let's look at an example of how our thoughts can limit us, and how finding alternative explanations can change our behavior and the end result.

Your boss has given you a costing exercise to do. You automatically go into a panic as your thoughts begin to tell you that you're terrible at math and that you are going to mess this up. Everyone will see how stupid you are.

To reframe your thoughts, you would first look at the root cause of the thought.

Why do you believe that you are terrible at math? Is it that you received average marks, or maybe even failed math at school? Is it because you don't know how to correctly cost products?

Once you have ascertained why you feel the way you do, you would challenge this thought.

How long has it been since you left school? How often do you do math? How readily available are quick costing courses or videos to you? Have I even tried to do a costing exercise?

Now, seek solutions.

Take a quick course online, test your current level of knowledge, do breathing or relaxation exercises to rid yourself of anxiety.

And, if you find that you really cannot do the costing exercise, ask yourself, "what is the worst that can happen if I approach my boss telling him that I am not quite equipped to do the task assigned to me?"

Chances are that if you really cannot do the task, your boss will respect you for being honest and forthright.

But if you have tried, and you have equipped yourself with the knowledge, and reframed your thoughts to, "I can do this because I have learned and I am capable," you will succeed, despite what your thoughts are telling you.

And what happens once you succeed?

The next time you are presented with a costing, or any other assignment for that matter, your thought process will be slightly different.

There may still be some doubt in the beginning, but your brain will remember that with knowledge and action you were successful, and it will seek to repeat that pattern until, eventually, every challenge you are presented with will be met with the same mindset.

The Pros and Cons of Cognitive Restructuring

There are a host of benefits to restructuring your thoughts, but perhaps the most convenient of these is that it can be done anywhere, at any moment of the day.

Your therapist will, at first, guide you through the process, but, ultimately, you are in control of how quickly you can restructure negative thought patterns.

Identifying and changing your thoughts removes your limitations and you will begin to experience lower levels of stress and anxiety. Because so much of negative thought patterns revolve around limiting beliefs within our own minds, communication becomes a number one priority in breaking these thoughts, and strong communication skills, as well as healthier relationships, become a byproduct of cognitive restructuring.

You will begin to replace your negative coping mechanisms with positive ones, improving your confidence in your abilities, and your self-esteem will soar.

But, perhaps, the most beneficial of the pros is that you will begin to habitually act for success instead of hiding from life.

You will begin to live again and thrive, and what better outcome could there be for any treatment program?

Like everything else in life though, you need to take the rough with the smooth, and cognitive restructuring comes with one drawback.

Thankfully, this con is in your hands, and that means you are required to be honest and to communicate your thoughts rather than trying to hide from them in negative self-soothing behaviors.

Unfortunately, we cannot hide from our failures, nor can we hope to avoid them by locking ourselves away in our thoughts and our behaviors.

You will need to be prepared to face your thoughts head-on, challenging them every time they threaten to derail you.

Having said that, it takes less than a month to replace an old habit with a new, positive one.

So what are you waiting for?

Conclusion

Respond; don't react. Listen; don't talk. Think; don't assume. –Raji Lukkoor

Living with OCD can be difficult and between persistent, unwanted thoughts. The amount of time spent on performing compulsive behaviors in an attempt to self-soothe can sometimes feel like you will never have your old life back.

The reality is that it is possible to live a happy, healthy life in which you can thrive, despite having OCD.

By starting a comprehensive treatment plan that includes therapy, lifestyle changes, and medications if necessary, OCD can be managed and your symptoms will begin to diminish.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is the gold standard for OCD, and by learning to challenge, resist, and desensitize yourself to your obsessions and compulsions, you can begin to take back your life.

Having said that, support, self-care, and a vested interest in making positive lifestyle changes is also important and it is imperative that you take responsibility for your own life too.

While living with OCD may present a number of challenges for you, and for the people who care for you, it is certainly not the worst thing that could happen to you. And I know that trying to rid yourself of your thoughts is probably difficult to comprehend, let alone even considering going through your day without performing ritualistic behaviors, but I promise you it can be done.

I hope that in reading this book you have a clearer picture of what your life could be, with a little work and dedication from yourself.

Your first actionable step should always be to have discussions with your physician and with your therapist to work out a treatment plan that will work for you, but you cannot rely on other people alone.

And no, there is no cure for OCD, but that doesn't mean that your condition cannot be managed and that you cannot live the most amazing life.

There was a time in my life when OCD dictated my every move. I was a slave and it was my master. Through therapy, support, and lifestyle changes, I was able to manage my symptoms and now I like to think of OCD as a somewhat annoying acquaintance—it comes into my life occasionally but the exchanges are brief and I am in control.

Sure, OCD will always be there, but I now have the knowledge and the tools to keep our exchanges brief.

For myself, I was vehemently against medication. I am by no means saying that you shouldn't listen to what your physician and therapist say, but for me, it wasn't an option.

Did it make my treatment plan tougher?

Probably.

Was I terrified at every ERP session?

Definitely!

But it was through desensitization, deep breathing techniques, mindfulness, and exercise that I truly began to feel like I was firmly in control over how successful I would be in managing my symptoms.

And the same is true for you because, whether you believe it or not right now, you can do this!

I would encourage you to begin with your at-home treatment.

You don't need to do all of the things all at once, but please just start.

Start by challenging those thoughts. Start by desensitizing yourself. Start by leaving the house and walking a little further and faster every day. Start by choosing to nourish your body and mind correctly, and start by focusing on your breath.

You can do this.

OCD is not the end, it is the beginning of a thriving life if you choose to shift it from overbearing slave driver to annoying acquaintance.

I will leave you with one thought—something I still hold onto today, and a mantra I use whenever that old acquaintance comes to visit unexpectedly.

Nothing has power over you if you don't let it.

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