

What is obsessive compulsive disorder?

A day in the life of Maureen

My day starts at 6 a.m. I am very tired as I have been obsessing during the night. I get up because if, for some reason, I am delayed by a ritual, I will start to panic that I will be late. I am filled with dread waiting for a trigger to set my mind off. After I have showered, I step out and carefully switch off the tap. I stare at the shower-head with a deep concentration to ensure it is switched off. I repeat the words 'check, check, check'. I brush my teeth at the sink. Once finished, I turn off the cold tap so hard it could snap any day. I now turn both taps in the off direction just to make sure and follow this by placing my hands under both taps to feel there is no water running: 'check, check, check'. I stare at the sink with the utmost concentration until I am convinced the water is absolutely, 100 per cent switched off. I then get a roll of kitchen towel (I go through a pack of four a day). I start by wiping over the shower door to remove any drops of water. I wipe the shower door over

and over; I know it looks perfectly clean but I do it just in case I have missed one little mark. I wipe the windowsill, the toothbrush mug (which is never used: I am too frightened of making a mess). I then clean the soap dish holder. I try to put the liquid soap bottle back on the dish so it is straight. No matter how I do it, it just doesn't look straight. Five minutes go by and I still can't do it and I start to panic. I know I am going to be late and then my whole day will be messed up. I finally get the soap into a position which, although it doesn't look quite right, is OK because I have counted to ten. By counting to ten I get comfortable with it in my mind and so can move on to the next thing. I make sure the towels are aligned and check that the floor mats are straight. I then completely clean the sink and taps so that there's not a drop of water or a single mark anywhere.

Before leaving the bathroom I repeat the checking of the shower and sink - both with my hands and with long, concentrated stares - chanting my mantra 'check, check, check', until I feel safe to move out of the door backwards, not turning away until the 'moment feels right'. I now move out of the bathroom backwards; everything is still OK. Then I switch off lights - pausing to check they are all off: 'check, check, check' - until it's safe. If there is any interruption, I have to start again.

I again resort to counting to ten as I slowly shut the door. I must not bang the door as I am sure the vibration will knock something out of place. I am not completely happy with the bathroom, but move on to the bedroom.

I then check the curtains, bed, wardrobe, and drawers to see if they are symmetrical, with everything in the right order. All my clothes are hung in groups: long-sleeved tops, dresses, jeans, skirts, T-shirts, more jeans, belts. My clothes are also colour-coordinated from the lightest shade to the darkest shade. I spend hours straightening the clothes before I feel comfortable; I actually wear the same thing nearly every day and wash it each night so I don't mess anything up. My jewellery is arranged and grouped in boxes but I don't even open the boxes any more, let alone take any jewellery out, as I am frightened of moving anything. I have to force myself to leave the room. I really want to go back in and check everything again, but it is getting late, so I don't - but I feel very anxious.

I then go into the kitchen. I avoid using the sink as it is so clean and perfect. I am frightened that if I do use it, I will never get it looking as perfect as it does now. If I have any dirty dishes, I wash them with the tap in the garden. I check the tea, coffee, and sugar jars for any marks. I always touch them using a kitchen towel as my fingers would make marks. I then check the kettle, toaster, bin, hob, oven, and coffee machine. I then wipe the cupboard doors in case there are any marks. I then check inside the cupboards, although no one touches them except me as I don't allow anyone in the kitchen. I have cans of food perfectly arranged with the labels facing outward. I avoid using any of this food. I prefer to take food out of the refrigerator, which is easier as it is all microwaveable. I gave up cooking a

long time ago as it was far too messy. I generally don't eat or drink too much anyway, as I could need to use the bathroom when I am out of the house and would not want to use any public toilets. I always travel with a roll of toilet paper just in case.

I then check the table and chairs, which have not been used for over a year. The place mats, salt and pepper pots, and flower vase are all perfectly symmetrically arranged, as are the table and chairs. I have even drawn around the chair legs just in case I knock a chair. The marks are very reassuring. It is just not worth the trouble of using the table and chairs as it would take me hours to get them all back perfectly in place. I scan the table and chairs for five minutes trying to find anything out of place. When I feel they are just right in my mind, I feel a bit less panicky.

Get ready to go out. I put things in my handbag in a precise order: 'phone, cigarettes, lighter, keys, money, credit card'. Repeat these words over and over until I feel comfortable. I call my husband to lock the door and check the stove and kitchen taps - THIS I HATE DOING. However, if I checked these, it would hold me up for another thirty minutes until I felt comfortable. I tell my husband what I have switched on, or opened, and ask him to recheck after I have left. I repeat my 'six-item handbag mantra' in front of him and then leave. Now I am at the front gate. I make sure it is closed behind me, several times. 'Check, check, check.'

At last I am in the car. Have I got my handbag? Look hard and concentrate. 'Check, check, check.' I briefly

check the six items in my bag and then drive off. At the end of the street I recheck my bag, while driving - so this check takes a while. I turn off the radio, as otherwise I can't concentrate. 'Check, check, check' until I feel comfortable. Then I recheck my six handbag items while driving - all must be spoken out loud in the right order and right rhythm until I feel comfortable.

I eventually reach the shopping centre and park the car. I then start my car-locking ritual. There are eight things to be checked in precise order and rhythm. 'Passenger window closed, my window closed, handbrake on, car in gear, lights off, ashtray closed, radio off, inside light off'. I may need to repeat this ritual several times until I feel comfortable. I must also touch all the different things as I check them. I am especially hard on the handbrake, pulling it up further each time I check it. Hence my brake cable frequently gets replaced. I can now get out of the car. I close and lock the door. Begin my five-item 'outside car' ritual. 'My door locked, my window closed, trunk locked, passenger door locked, passenger window closed.' I repeat the words 'check, check, check' at each stage until I feel comfortable. I pray that no one I know arrives in the supermarket parking lot while I am in the midst of these rituals - otherwise I have to smile, pretend to go into the supermarket, and then return when all is clear to start all over again. I flinch when I see some small girls walking across the supermarket parking lot. I get that awful thought inside my head, and anxiety and fear fill my body with dread. I freeze. 'What if I get turned on?' Horrible images bombard my head

and uncontrollable feelings fill my body. I think I must be disgusting to have such things go through my head and try really hard to push them out of my mind but I can't make them go away. Eventually I leave to make sure I don't do anything awful. I go over and over again about what having these thoughts and feelings must mean. All I can come up with is that I'm sick and disgusting. I can never be sexual, I can never be normal. I am evil and horrible . . .

Maureen has *some* of the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), which is a condition characterized by the presence of either obsessions or compulsions (but commonly both). We shall define obsessions and compulsions shortly, but first want to emphasize that if you have OCD *you are not alone*. It is estimated that about 1 in 100 people has the condition to some degree. OCD can be a serious problem, and if left untreated can lead an individual to be isolated and significantly handicapped. Because of this, the World Health Organization has listed OCD *in the top ten most disabling illnesses in the world*.

Is this book for you?

Despite its many chapters, this book has a simple central message; OCD is a common problem, individuals with OCD are not crazy, and OCD *can* be overcome. The book is aimed at individuals with OCD and their families or partners. We are both clinicians and researchers with, between us, over twenty-five years' experience in helping patients with OCD.

The book will guide you through some tried and tested steps in overcoming OCD.

Our experience is that individuals with OCD may struggle with self-help books for three common reasons. If you do have any of these concerns, please do read on as there is every chance that these fears will be allayed.

The first reason is that they fear that thinking about their problem will make it worse. In fact, the opposite is true. When individuals try to avoid thinking about their OCD and what they can do about it, then the problems persist and over time become more difficult to solve. We shall try to help you develop a good psychological understanding of what is keeping your problem going and therefore of what you can do to stop OCD ruining your life.

Second, they fear that if they learn about other obsessions or compulsions, they will 'pick up' another worry. There is no evidence that you can 'catch' or exacerbate OCD from reading about other obsessions. If you develop a new obsession, then unfortunately it or a different one would probably have arisen in any case. The content of an obsession may fluctuate, but the form remains the same. This book will help you to reach a better understanding of OCD, which you can then apply to your own problems, with or without the help of a therapist.

Third, individuals with OCD believe that because obsessions can vary enormously, no one book will be able to cover all of the different types of obsessions and compulsions. Maureen has just some of the common obsessions and compulsions, but later on we will introduce several other individuals with different types of OCD. Even so, a