

How I Control My OCPD Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder

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Introduction

In connection with recognizing my OCPD – Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder – I have made some experiences on what has worked for me in the war on OCPD.

I hope these experiences can benefit others. I have e-mail contact with several OCPDers and their spouses, and I am active in a number of Internet forums. The more OCPDers that share their experiences the better opportunities others have in getting on with their lives.

This is not a scientific review of psycho-therapeutic tools for working on OCPD let alone a review of what OCPD is. If that is what you are looking for, you can take a look in the WHO database on line or perhaps Wikipedia.

I am describing the techniques I use. I offer no explanations on why it works, which is completely unimportant. This is a short review of some of the things that has worked out for me.

If you can use some of my experiences I will be happy. If not, I just hope you find other techniques that will work for you.

You and those close to you can have significantly better lives. But it requires you put in the effort.

Morten Gudbjerg Karlsen
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OCPD – Only Contemplates Potential Disasters

Techniques

I was diagnosed by a psychiatrist in a hospital, and I have been through an intensive therapy course with a psychologist in private practice. It has been rough, really rough. But the reward has been enormous.

I will never be cured of OCPD. That is simply the way I am constructed. It will never be different, but I can choose not to display any OCPD behaviors.

To be an aware OCPDer means to me that every single minute I choose not to display OCPD behaviors the next sixty seconds. And that is how it will be for the rest of my life.

I am in an eternal war on my OCPD. Often the OCPD strikes back sometimes with a vengeance. But now I recognize the dark thoughts. I will never win the war, but that doesn't mean I can't win every single battle. And to do that I have a well stocked weapons arsenal – my techniques.

I shall try to separate the various techniques I use. In reality I use them all in one big jumble.

Common for all techniques is they are not something I have come up with myself. Some of the techniques are things my psychologist has made me try. Others I have “stolen” from the Danish beautician Ole Henriksen, and yet other stuff I have picked up from other OCPDers and their spouses.

I have also tried other things, but they didn't work out for me. There is no guarantee “my” techniques will work for you. But I wanted to give you the opportunity to try them out.

Acceptance

The very first thing the therapist wanted me to work on was to accept I can't change the past. I can influence the future, but I cannot change what has already happened.

At first it sounds logical, but it isn't that easy to reach that recognition in the real world. When I finally understood, what I had put my family through all thoughts circled around how to make it up to them.

But you cannot make it all alright. It is impossible. You cannot change the past.

And if I wanted to move on I had to give up the past and accept, that no matter what I could think of I could never compensate for the things I have done.

I have to focus on how I want the future to be. The past is past.

The psychologist told me (many times) I am not a bad person. I am a good person who has done some bad things.

You are not a bad person either. You are a good person. And you have the strength to move on. Accept who you are and look to the future.

Meditation

“I want to start you on a process called Mindfulness,” said the therapist to me during one of our first sessions. Mindfulness, I had never heard the word.

And then she even tells me, that in its basic form it is a Buddhist concept, but a Danish coach (among others) have worked on the concept and adapted it to a modern everyday life.

All warning lights were turned on. Buddhism is certainly not for me. I bet this is just some New Age nonsense, and it will certainly not work on me. Oh yeah, I have rigid opinions to spare.

But I had promised myself not to dismiss anything beforehand.

To be mindful is about being present in the moment and be non-judgmental. To observe which thought and emotions you are having right now, and how the whole body relaxes and get into a state of rest. Observe but do not analyze, judge and catalog.

I am not going to spend a lot of time describing Mindfulness in depth. There are a lot of resources on Mindfulness on line and on the book listing on the last page I have mentioned a book I have used myself throughout therapy. (It's in Danish.)

The really interesting part is, that the book came with a CD with some simple meditation exercises on it.

Now, meditation is not something for me. That is most definitely rubbish. But as I said I had promised myself not to dismiss anything.

I found myself a quiet corner, put the CD on and listened. The first exercise was going to take about 16 minutes. The three-four minutes were just instructions. Sit down. Close your eyes. Let your hands rest in your lap. Relax your lips. Relax your forehead. Relax your shoulders. Relax your stomach. Continue until your entire body is relaxed.

Then I had to breathe in through my nose and exhale through my mouth. With every inhalation I should feel the cool air flowing in through the nose and all the way down into the lungs. On every exhalation I was to count my breaths. One to ten. If I felt my mind started to wander I was to start the counting over. One to ten. When I reached ten I was to start over. One to ten.

The first couple of minutes I just felt stupid. How on earth is this going to help me with anything. But I counted breaths. One, two, th... Whoops. Start over. One... Eh... OK. One, two, three, four, ah, this time I will reach ten. Urrgh. All over. One, two...

At the end of the exercise a bell rang. I hear the bell, and there is not a single thought in my head. I haven't had a thought or worry for ten minutes. Incredible.

It was actually such a landmark for me, that I was almost jumping up and down. It was so wild. I cannot remember the last time I was completely relaxed.

You do not need the CD to get started. Find a calm spot. Set the egg-timer for twenty minutes. Start to relax your entire body. Part for part. Close your eyes. Let your hands rest in your lap. Relax your lips. Relax your forehead. Relax your shoulders, etc. continue all the way down to your ankles.

If you follow the breathing and the counting you can experience being completely relaxed.

Breathing exercises

The before mentioned meditation exercise can be boiled down to a simple breathing exercise you can use anywhere and anytime.

No matter where you are you focus on your breathing. Feel the air flow in though through your nose and out through your mouth. And you can count your exhalations from one to ten over and over again.

Many times I have done breathing exercises standing in line in the supermarket, in the mall on a Saturday morning, when the kids are running around like savages and on the highway.

It has a good effect on the quiet everyday stress, where you feel you are just a little too slow to keep up with what ever is going on around you.

Visualizations

When a rage is imminent and all my breathing exercises aren't working out, I have to go somewhere by myself for a second.

Especially in the first period after I recognized my OCPD it was difficult to control the anxiety. It often boiled up to a rage.

Then I used visualizations. I even use them today, and it is in the word visualization that it is about imagining. The idea of course is to imagine a calm and relaxed place.

I use various visualizations, and I think it is important you find your own version.

When I really need to control myself right now I go into our bathroom. It is the only room we have with no windows. Then I sit there in the dark and think about my quiet place.

It is not always exactly the same spot, but in general it looks like this. I imagine I am in a big British manor style garden. It is close to a forest. There are some squirrels, a fox, some deer. Some times I can hear people at the other end of the garden. I believe it is Hans Christian Andersen reading to some children. I feel the wind. I can smell the flowers and the trees. I can hear the birds. I stand still and sense.

When I can't find calm I try to let calm find me.

It takes a tremendous amount of concentration to imagine so intensely that you actually can feel the wind in your hair and hear the leaves rustle. It moves the mental focus away from what ever it was that was stressing me out.

I also use another visualization. . For instance if I am outside I let my eyes follow a little beetle. Follow it wandering through the grass. Imagining where it is headed. What is going to do. "It is probably on the home from work. Now Mrs. Beetle is waiting back home with soup. Oh, Mr. Beetle is humming as he is trotting along." I concentrate solely on the beetle whilst I am making a naive little story.

Visualizing takes some practice and a whole lot of concentration. It might take a few attempts before you find your quiet place or the stories you can use. But once you get the hang of it, it is highly effective.

I use a visualization of a wild lion as an image of my OCPD. I am on an eternal migration across the savannah with this wild lion. I do not know why, but we are forced to walk together towards a goal neither of us know.

I can never tame him, but as time passes I am getting better and better at reading his signals, and I can get closer and closer to him. Sometimes I am so close I can touch and smell him. Sometimes I have to keep some distance between us. And if I misunderstand his signals, he will attack me and eat me.

Just as the OCPD will flare up if I am not paying attention to what my subconscious is up to.

When I can feel I am getting aggravated I imagine how the lion has been lying in the shade of an Acacia tree, but now he is beginning to show an “unhealthy interest” in me. He growls, he waves his tail, ears are turned straight forward, he stands up and he begins to sneak up on me. Perhaps he starts running towards me.

It is time to back off. I imagine how I calmly pull away from the lion. He has demonstrated his strength, and I gave him the necessary room.

The OCPD was running wild, but I changed my focus and managed to regain the calm.

Lions have to eat once in a while. “My” OCPD lion too. When I use the positive sides of my OCPD, e.g. my analytical sense, I imagine it is the lion making a kill. After he has eaten, it is time to digest, relax and enjoy the meal.

It is the same thing with the OCPD. When I have solved a problem (or just learned something new), I don't let the OCPD stay in control. I have to relax and enjoy “my kill.”

On my right upper arm I have actually gotten a tattoo of “my lion.” The image have become that important to me.

Maybe manor style gardens or lions aren't for you. Perhaps your OCPD is a fine tuned race car, a house, a supermarket or something completely different. But try to make internal images of your OCPD. It can be of great help.

Total openness

Total openness, no secrets, an OCPDers nightmare, right? But from day one I have practiced total openness. I haven't kept secrets from anyone.

Even before I was diagnosed I began to inform everyone. Family, friends, neighbors, work, the kids' school, the scouts. Everybody knew everything. I don't really know why I did it, but instinctively I knew it was necessary.

I think it was necessary for me not to have any outs. No matter what happened I knew, I could not hide my bad sides any more.

It has been – and still is – of tremendous importance to me to be open about my OCPD. Since my recognition of my problem I haven't had to hide anything. I have actually been able to share my burden with others.

I have gotten a tremendous amount of support from a lot of people. At first I had to tell over and over how I tick. What OCPD means and what I have done. How therapy went. But quite soon it passed. OCPD was completely trivial to the people around me. I was just being Morten again. No dark secrets. No reason to weigh every word. I am just Morten (who happens to have OCPD).

“But how do I break the ice,” you might ask. Something I have tried myself and I know others also have had success with is having a book on OCPD in the pocket or in the bag and then just happen to leave it on the table at say the workplace. When people ask what you are reading you can answer “it's just something about my OCPD.” And then the conversation is on. “Oh, have I really never told you I have OCPD. I was so sure I have told everybody.”

Granted, it may be a little sneaky, but it works. Try it yourself. Total openness may sound masochistic, but once you have started to talk about your OCPD it is a tremendous relief.

Total openness is also a colossal help in being present in the moment. If you are serene and open about who you are, you can let go of the worries about whether you are saying the right thing at the right time. You can be present in the moment.

Lifestyle

This is not going to be the Grand Health Lecture, but I am going to share a few experiences with you. Caffeine is enhancing any anxieties you may have and nicotine makes your stress levels go up.

I quit caffeine and cigarettes around the time of my diagnosis, and it was a big help. Of course, at times I am offered a cup of coffee, but I can feel the anxieties if I have more than one cup.

As so many other smokers I gave in to temptation for a few days, but that was a bad idea. My stress levels sky rocketed right away, so it was clear to me nicotine is bad for me.

By the way, try tasting the food again. I had – of course – very rigid opinions on what foods I liked and disliked. But after my recognition I have realized a lot of that was just preconceived opinions. I was never a picky eater. I just had some things I preferred to eat. But now my menu is widely expanded.

Be open. Live healthy. Live well.

SMILE – DANCE – LAUGH

The technique that has helped me the most by far is something I call SMILE – DANCE – LAUGH.

I SMILE. I deliberately smile all the time. Not just a little smirk, a big smile, from ear to ear. And I hum little melodies to myself while I dance around. (And I am certainly not a natural born dancer.)

In fact it is simple psychology. If you make a sad face you feel sad. If you make a happy face you feel happy.

Try it yourself. Make a sad face – let your lower lip hang a bit. Let the sides of your mouth droop. Frown your forehead slightly. Look down. If you keep that face for a few seconds the sadness starts to creep up on you :-)

Now try the opposite. Look up. Make a big smile. Lips apart. At first you probably think you look like Krusty the Clown (Hey, hey), but I am willing to bet you, that in a couple of seconds you start to feel happier :-)

This is not my idea. I have “stolen” it from the Danish beautician Ole Henriksen. At one point he was hosting a short TV-series. Ole Henriksen is a short guy with a big (and permanent) smile on his face, and the series was about choosing to be happy.

Ole's recipe is to smile and dance and laugh. And it made a huge impression on me. Ole is known as a beauty guru, but seen with my glasses he is a brilliant happiness guru.

It sounds completely idiotic, but it works. Find some happy up-tempo music on the radio and dance and smile. It works. Of course it is not a miracle cure, but that constant small daily sadness, I always drag around, is chased away by smiles. All the everyday trifles that aren't exactly perfect and used to drive me crazy are unimportant as long as I smile. :-D

Basically I am happy because I smile (instead of the normal way of smiling because we are happy.)

SMILE – DANCE – LAUGH ...and your world is a much better place!

Positive thinking

The idea is always to look for the positive. Yeah, it sounds so easy, but it isn't. It is of the utmost importance, but it is not easy.

OCPDers are preprogrammed to look for the negative in everything. We do not see the light. We only see the shadows. But we simply have to change that.

The problem for us OCPDers is that since we are so darn good at seeing the negative we wouldn't recognize the positive even if it jumped up and kissed us on the nose.

We must train ourselves to recognize the positive. There is something positive in everything, but we have to learn to see it.

Take it in baby steps. Get out and talk to other people. Look for the joy in the mother's eye as she sits on the bus with her small child on her lap. Look for the joy in your co-worker when he talks about his new car. Look for the joy in the child eating an ice cream.

Look for the positive in the little things. Look for the positive in everyday life. Practice looking for the positive constantly.

In time it will be perfectly natural to you to look for the positive. Remember, negative emotions are stoppers, and positive emotions are initiators.

Self-irony is also a good thing to have. We don't need to be so darn serious about ourselves. A personal example - I enjoy the TV-series The Simpsons. On this series there is a terrible quack called Dr. Nick Riviera. The psychiatrist who diagnosed me was also Dr. Nick. (OK. Different last name.) But it is funny that I am a nut case and Dr. Nick diagnosed me.

There is something positive in everything.

Summary

The first step is to accept that you are who you are. Then you just have to start working on those personality traits, which are causing people around you problems.

Don't analyze your problems endlessly. That won't make you feel better. DO SOMETHING instead.

You cannot think away the OCPD. DO SOMETHING.

When the dark thoughts sneak up on you, you better get up off the couch. BE ACTIVE. The dark thoughts are fought the easiest if you are doing something both mentally and physically. GET UP and go to another room. Just by walking from the couch to the kitchen for a cup of tea means that you – combined with SMILING – are leaving the dark thoughts behind.

And if you are caught at work, you can change your work positions or focus on flexing your calves. Even small stuff can have a big effect.

Try out various techniques. Because you have tried something that doesn't work for you, doesn't mean it was a setback. It was a path you have explored, but it didn't lead you where you wanted to go. You have become wiser. You have learned something about yourself and your OCPD. That is positive.

Find the techniques you benefit from and practice them ruthlessly and CONSTANTLY.

OCPD is a tricky adversary. Time after time it strikes back whenever you lower your guard, but if you know your techniques – your weapons – it will be easier to pull out just what you need in that situation.

The war on your OCPD will never end, but that doesn't mean you can't win every battle.

It has been an incredibly enriching experience for me to come out of my shell – out of the dark and damp cave an OCPD life is. My life has become so much lighter and happier and so can yours be lighter and happier.

Books and links

"Too Perfect. When Being in Control Gets Out of Control."

by Allan E. Mallinger and Jeanette De Wyze

Published by Clarkson Potter 1992

In English

"Mindfulness i hverdagen"

by Charlotte Mandrup

Published by Politikens forlag 2008

In Danish

Note: Charlotte Mandrup has also written Mindfulness which is not the same as Mindfulness i hverdagen.

"Tightrope Walking: All You Need to Know about OCPD and Perfectionism"

by Gwyneth Daniel

Willows Books Publishing 2008

In English.

Free download on www.lendingtheway.com/tightrope/OCPD2.pdf

OCPD.dk (www.ocpd.dk) – Danish website on OCPD. Links to several OCPD-forums.

Forstyrret.dk – Danish patients association for people with personality disorders. The website contains information, blogs and a debate forum. (www.forstyrret.dk).

OCPD Support forum (<http://ocpd.freeforums.org>) – big group in English with sections for both spouses and OCPDers.

OCPD on Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OCPD>) – about OCPD on the English section of Wikipedia.

Ole Henriksen (www.olehenriksen.com) – beauty expert and happy man.