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The Links of OCD

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You now know that OCD has two main components: obsessions and compulsions. When your mind become overclouded with obsessive thoughts and images, you might resort to unnecessary rituals, as a way of relieving tension. Keeping your compulsions in check could sometimes seems like an impossible task. The harder you try to resist it, the stronger it grows. At some point, you may even choose to accept defeat and succumb to the disorder.

Every time you fail to control your compulsive behavior, it is likely that your self-esteem and motivation suffer the consequences. Watching ourselves fail time after time is never easy, which is why we need to change the way we see the relationship between obsessions and compulsions.

But how do these two mechanisms work? How do they interact with each other? More importantly, what keeps them is such a seemingly unbreakable bond?



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What Do Obsessions Feel Like?

As you already know from previous articles, obsessions are repetitive, overwhelming and intrusive. Imagine yourself sitting comfortably in bed, trying to fall asleep after a hard day's work. All of the sudden, a thought emerges in your mind, telling you that "the door is unlocked".

Even though you know for sure that the door is firmly locked (because you've already

checked 10 times), your obsessive thoughts won't quit bothering you.

Appealing to reason won't do much good because your mind, which is currently dominated by obsessions, will keep looking for explanations in favor of your obsessive thoughts. "Maybe the lock mechanism is broken so even though I turned the key, the door remains unlocked."

It Is Not about Rationality

If we consider the explanation for a moment, we might find that it is extremely unlikely, since someone who has a broken lock would be well aware of that fact. However, for someone struggling with OCD, this theory would seem plausible.

Why Can't We Resist?

Of course you might say that a person in that situation should simply try and resist thinking about the door. However, the longer you fight the urge to check the lock, the worse you'll feel. It is highly likely that the obsession would keep growing exponentially, until it becomes unbearable.

The reason why obsessive thoughts are so hard to ignore is anxiety. Some describe it as an overwhelming fear, while others see it as stressful and nerve-racking. Despite our various definitions and explanations, anxiety acts as an invisible hand, pushing us towards compulsions.

What Do Compulsions Lead to?

Each obsession has a corresponding compulsion, a ritual meant to reduce the stress and anxiety caused by intrusive thoughts or images. To the onlooker, these rituals may seem ridiculous, but for someone who struggles with OCD, it's the only way to reduce anxiety, or at least that is what they believe.

The Birth of a Compulsion

Whenever you engage in compulsive behaviors, your anxiety is relieved, leaving room for relaxation and a sense of calm. This pleasant sensation acts as positive reinforcement for the compulsive behavior. In other words, next time you feel troubled by obsessions, you'll immediately resort to compulsions, because this strategy worked great in the past.

Feeding Your Anxiety

The graph below represents anxiety. "O" stands for obsessions, while "C" stands for compulsions.

Every time you engage in compulsive behaviors, your anxiety level drops, but only until an obsession appears again, which triggers an increase in anxiety. This calls for further compulsive behaviors and so on. Although it seems like a good strategy, using compulsions to overcome anxiety is only a short-term solution that actually increases your long-term anxiety and decreases your self-esteem. If you look at the big picture, you'll see that the overall level of anxiety keeps growing, as long as you engage in compulsive behavior.

Anxiety Can't Grow Indefinitely

This may sound odd, but anxiety exists to serve a purpose. Despite all the negative symptoms associated with anxiety, it is a natural mechanism designed to make us aware of potentially dangerous situations.

Since this mechanism is inherently good, it cannot cause indefinite harm. We know that sometimes anxiety makes us feel like we're about to crash, and yet we do not. Nobody has yet passed away because of anxiety, and you're definitely not an exception to this rule. Anxiety only grows until a certain point after which it naturally decreases, because that's how it was designed to function. It resembles an alarm clock – either it will stop ringing after a certain period of time, or you will manually turn it off.

Understanding the inner workings of OCD, allows us to perceive it in a healthier way and understand that we have a say in the matter. In the upcoming articles, you will discover appropriate ways to deal with anxiety, thus eliminating the need to engage in compulsive behaviors.

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