

What is OCD?

1. <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/810961>
2. Obsessions: Recurrent, persistent thoughts, impulses or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate, causing marked anxiety or distress. They are excessive and unreasonable, not grounded in reality, and a product of one's own mind rather than someone else's conditioning.
Compulsions: Repetitive behaviours that a person feels driven to perform in response to the obsession, to resolve and quiet the worries by preventing some dreaded event or situation, but that are an unrealistic or excessive response to the situation.
3. Standard treatment approaches
 - Medication
 - Psychoanalysis
 - Behaviour Therapy – Includes Exposure and Response Prevention, Emotional Habituation, Response Repetition
 - Cognitive Therapy – Includes Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Guided Imagery
 - Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

Does Religion Cause OCD?

4. Obsessions include:
 - Fear that one has sinned, or will sin
 - Fear that one has taken a vow with some thought, to engage in some action
 - Fear of blasphemous or immoral thoughts
 - Fear that Gd is punishing or will punish them or others because of this person's inadequacies.
5. Compulsions include:
 - Hyper-attention to the words of prayer, and to establishing proper concentration for prayer
 - Hyper-concern about washing one's hands and cleaning other parts of one's body, as in for prayer
 - Hyper-concern about dietary law, but specifically in the area of cleanliness
 - Hyper-concern about questioning Gd's existence and desires
6. David Greenberg and Eliezer Witztum, *Current Treatments of OCD* Chapter 10, pg. 176
OCD symptoms of a religious nature are not found in all areas of ritual, nor necessarily in the areas of ritual most hallowed by the religion. In our experience with religious Jewish patients, for example, Sabbath observance is a very important feature of religious life associated with many detailed laws but does not appear frequently among the religious obsessions of OCD in our clinic. However, cleaning the perianal region before prayer gets one line in the footnote of a latterday code of Jewish law, but this ritual presents often in patients with OCD in our practice. The presentation of OCD in a religious context is less typically religious than it is classically obsessive-compulsive...

The True Nature of Religious OCD

7. Religion's potential contributory role
 - Legitimizing obsessions – Thought-Action Fusion; Minutiae; Punitive Gd; Flawed humanity
 - Complicating diagnosis – Is it religion or OCD?; Blaming bad training
 - Challenging treatment – Accepting secular aid; ERP challenges; Distrust for treatment; Clergy cooperation
8. Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease: Help for Scrupulosity and Religious Compulsions*, pg. 8
A superficial view may lead an observer to conclude, as do some mental health professionals, that religion is the source of scrupulosity. After all, a scrupulous man obsesses about sinning if he feels attracted to a pretty woman only because he believes this constitutes "committing adultery in his heart." The superficial view fails to distinguish between religion causing the disorder from religion as its background. Religion does not cause scrupulosity any more than teaching someone French history causes him to believe he is Napoleon. All human beings exist in some cultural context... Cultural backgrounds provide the scenery around which emotional problems create the drama...

9. David Greenberg and Eliezer Witztum, Current Treatments of OCD Chapter 10, pg. 175

It may be suggested, in summary, that obsessions of OCD appear to mirror the prevalent habits and values of a culture. Religious symptoms are common in OCD in cultures in which religious practice and ritual are important. It appears that if a topic is dealt with scrupulously in everyday life, then it is a likely focus for the symptoms of OCD that will emerge in that culture.

10. Rabbi JM Grinwald, Etzot v'Hadrachot pg. 85, cited by Greenberg/Shefler *Ultra-Orthodox Rabbinic Responses to Religious Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, Israeli Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences 45:3 pg. 186

[T]he person who, whenever he performs the will of the Creator, finds his soul and his energies contorted by feelings of discomfort, fear, tension and misery over the carrying out of the commandment — and, on the contrary, this is his usual state, and to carry out commandments out of joy is the exception — this then is clear proof that this was not Gd's intention. For "strength and joy are in His place" (Chronicles I 16:27), meaning that the essence of performing commandments is joy, as Maimonides wrote...

11. OHEL, Totally Engrossed: Extreme Piousness or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?

The key question to ask a religious person who is irrationally scrupulous about religious matters, is: "Are your chumros enhancing your religious development or impinging upon it?" Herein lies the answer. A person who davens an exceedingly long Shemoneh Esrei may merit the same heavenly assistance that allowed the Chassidim Harishonim to be involved in davening for nine hours a day while still mastering Torah study (as described in Gemora Berachos). He then is not suffering from any mental dysfunction. A person who is just repeating words over and over again, however, and feels frustrated and depressed by this imprisoning ritual, will not grow in his religious observance and is victim of mental illness, not piety. This person needs treatment.

12. Dr. David Greenberg's test (Current Treatments of OCD Chapter 10, pg. 180)

- Compulsions transcend requirements of religious law
- Compulsions have a narrow focus on one area of religious experience
- Compulsions focus on something that is trivial to religious practice, but normal for OCD
- Compulsions cause the patient to ignore, or to be unable to fulfill, other areas of religious law
- The patient repeats actions because of doubt, where law would not require it.

How Can Judaism Help?

13. Psalms 2:11 and 100:2

Serve Gd with reverence, and rejoice in trembling.

Serve Gd with joy, come before Him with song.

14. Rabbi Yaakov Kanaievsky (20th century USA), Etzot v'Hadrachot pg. 55, as cited at OHEL above

Such thinking is a tactic of the yeitzer hara in order to make observance of the mitzvos so burdensome that he will eventually, G-d forbid, shirk the yoke of the Torah.

15. Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 248:7

Regarding a generous person who gives more than is appropriate for him, or who pains himself to give to the collector to avoid shame, one may not demand and collect tzedakah from him. Gd will punish a collector who shames him and asks of him.

16. Proverbs 3:17

Her ways are pleasant ways, and all of her paths are of peace.

17. Mishnah Pesachim 1:2

We are not concerned that a rodent may have dragged leaven from house to house or place to place, for then from yard to yard and city to city – there would be no end to the matter!

18. Talmud, Yoma 30a

The Torah was not given to the ministering angels!

19. Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (Ramban, 13th century Spain), Laws of Niddah 9:25

One should not insert his head into serious, interminable doubts...

20. Talmud, Avodah Zarah 4b-5a

Rabbi Yochanan cited Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: David was not suited for that deed, and Israel was not suited for that deed [the Golden Calf]... Then why did they do it? To teach you that if someone sins, we tell him, "Go to the individual." And if a community sins, we tell him, "Go to the community."

21. Huppert/Siev/Kushner, *Treating Scrupulosity in Orthodox Jews*, J. of Clinical Psych 63:10 pg. 936

[T]he McDonald's test is useful: "Is doing this the same as going to McDonald's and eating a bacon cheeseburger?" Often this can help the person gain perspective about the reality of what they are being asked to do. They are not being asked to sin, but rather to tolerate a small (and halachically permissible) possibility that they may sin.

22. Talmud, Berachot 17b

[Regarding a personal stringency to avoid work on Tishah b'Av, in a place where the community normally does work:] Since everyone does work, and he does not do work, this will appear like self-righteous arrogance.

23. Rabbi Shabbtai haKohen (17th century Poland), *Pilpul b'Hanhagat Hora'ot b'Issur v'Heter*, Rule 9

Just as one may not permit the prohibited, so one may not prohibit the permitted... because generally, this will cause a leniency in some other area...

24. Talmud, Bava Kama 91b

The view that says one may not harm himself matches the view of Rabbi Elazar haKappar BeRebbi, who said: "Why does the Torah say that the Nazirite must bring an offering to atone for the sin he committed 'against a life?' Against whose life has he sinned?! It is because he pained himself by withdrawing from wine."

Worth Contemplating

25. *Yirah Tehorah* (20th century Bnei Brak, Israel) pg. 18

In truth, it is known to us, from experience and from those who are very involved in the field, that no one ever had the nerves halt on their own, without them declaring a war of destruction, a sacred war!... Also, one who neglects the issue due to laziness, failing to act, "is a colleague to the destructive person (Proverbs 28:24)"! He destroys for himself, entirely, the structure of prayer.

26. Rabbi Yisrael Ganz, cited in *Religious Compulsions and Fears* pg. 132

In cases that come before you regarding sufferers of religious compulsions, I think it is important to recall that which the *gedolei Yisrael*, such as the Steipler Rav, ztvk"l, and the gaon, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, ztvk"l, and others, have opined on this matter, that in every case of doubt in the *halachah*, one is to decide on the lenient side of the question. Likewise, even if it is unclear whether there is a doubt, one is also to be lenient...

27. Huppert/Siev/Kushner, *Treating Scrupulosity in Orthodox Jews*, J. of Clinical Psych 63:10 pg. 938

Ultimately, patients need to be willing to engage in the exposure and accept the uncertainty about whether it is permissible. The notion of accepting uncertainty and acting despite the anxiety is a guideline not only for a given exposure, but also for how OCD patients must live in general.

28. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, Foreword to *Religious Compulsions and Fears* pg. 16

[A]n OCD sufferer may not necessarily be reassured by the opinion of the *poskim*. One woman with OCD threw out three sets of dishes because she could not accept the Rav's ruling that the dishes were perfectly kosher, saying, "The Rav did not understand my *she'eilah*."