

# Living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

- written by a former New Leaf Resources client



Imagine waking up one morning and finding out that life with Covid is forever. Imagine there is no end. Imagine this is the way you would live the rest of your life.

Imagine that every time you walked outside, went into a public place or bathroom, sat down at a restaurant, shook someone's hand, took items off the shelf or up off the floor, you knew that would mean the exhausting work of thoroughly cleaning the item and thoroughly cleaning yourself. Imagine if the tension and fear remained forever.

For a good portion of humanity, that is our life. That is reality. These people quietly move around us unnoticed – mostly because that is the way they want it. They don't want you to notice

they regularly wash their hands until rubbed raw and bleeding. They don't want you to notice the pack of wipes they constantly keep within reach at all times just in case of "germ emergencies". They don't want you to see how they treat hand sanitizer like their best friend and feel a sense of panic when they can't find it. They're ashamed for others to see their behavior because they know others won't understand.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD as it is more commonly known, affects a great many people in varying degrees. There are those who struggle more at certain times of the year than others. Some struggle more when they are overly tired or because something triggered it. Still others struggle with it consistently every day – like a persistent hum that never ever stops, but for the most part, they have a handle on it. And for a select few, it is a minute-by-minute struggle.

People with OCD know it isn't practical. They know it isn't sensible. They are aware that what their mind says is logical doesn't agree with the anxiety rising in their chest when something triggers their OCD. They wish they could logic it away, set it aside or reason with it. One can try to reason with OCD and sometimes that works. But how does one logic with something that argues in circles?

Because when one's throat tightens to the point where breathing becomes difficult and the stomach clenches into a vise, all reason flies out the window and at that point the priority becomes doing whatever it takes to make the anxiety go away. Whether that means washing your hands until they crack, checking things multiple times, throwing away things you never would have tossed, etc.

Like many things psychological, the medical profession is still in the baby stages of figuring out ways to relieve the mental pressures many people face – whether depression, OCD or any other of the hundreds of mental illnesses in our world. The connections in the brain of an OCD person are different than one without OCD. Those with OCD literally look at the world differently due to brain function. This knowledge can be relieving and discouraging all at once. Relief in that it's physical and it's nothing one did to themselves.

Discouraging in that probably nothing medical can be done about it, at least not yet.

And as with other mental issues, such as depression, there is a great deal of misunderstanding of what OCD is. It's not liking things to be straight or in order. It's not being meticulous. It's a mental health condition that can exhaust and cause a great deal of shame in those who struggle with it.

Like depression there are ways to deal with it such as medication or counseling. These things help give tools to those who struggle so they can handle it more easily or to give them a leg up and more energy to fight it, but it doesn't ultimately solve it. And even those tools don't always help.



For more information, call

708-895-7310 or  
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## RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUALS

My first memories of dealing with OCD go back as far as five years of age. When I was five, I was wracked by guilt that was of a more religious kind. When I was in fourth grade it moved to needing all I cleaned, chores-wise around the house, be cleaned to perfection. Drying dishes that should have taken me 10 minutes could take me two hours.

As I grew up the issues varied – everything from fear of taking bedbugs home whenever I traveled, to struggling with public restrooms. Be it retreats at a summer camp or work projects over Spring Break for a week, I would agonize before, during and after the trips about possibly bringing bedbugs home. This meant that upon arriving home after an already exhausting trip, I would immediately go about washing everything for the next 3-4 hours.

And I do mean everything! From the shoes I took along, to the bags I packed my stuff in, it all went into the washer. And if I couldn't wash them by machine, I washed by hand. And if I couldn't wash it at all (things like cell phones don't like water after all) I would thoroughly do an inspection check of everything I had brought along to make sure I didn't carry anything home.

But why? Why would I do all this? Because that is the only way I knew of to relieve my anxiety. It calmed my racing mind, kept my heart from pounding out of my chest and stopped my stomach from feeling like a flock of birds and a box of rocks all took up residence in it at the same time.

Today when I know I am heading into a situation that could have triggers, I try to prep mentally ahead of time as much as I can. And while it's still exhausting, it helps.

But there are still times when my OCD is triggered by something it wasn't ready for. Those moments are the hardest because your mind feels like it freezes and is set ablaze all at once and you cannot think straight. The physical reaction when I have an OCD episode can be quite intense. I tend to freeze up mentally and almost immediately start hyperventilating. My vision sometimes goes dark and my brain goes tunnel-visioned on the issue, while at the same time I'm not able to keep one thought in my head, but instead a scattering of thoughts tumbles around non-stop. My whole body rises in temperature and I have to concentrate on slowing my breathing because my stomach has suddenly twisted itself into a pile of knots.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as just setting it aside, going to counseling or taking meds. I have been in counseling for years concerning this and while given a great many tools that help, it doesn't eradicate it.

I have also been on meds for a few years now. While there is no such thing as meds for OCD, research has shown that meds for depression help OCD, but they still don't know why. And just like depression, you have to find the right dose. This takes time. My first dose of meds was way too high. I couldn't sit still for more than a minute at a time, I was talking faster than I ever had, and what people had previously called a bubbly personality was more like boiling over with all of the excess energy I had.

We thankfully found the right dosage but, in time, the side-effects began to increase. While it slowed my erratic and fast brain activity, it had the frustrating side effect of slowing it so much, I couldn't get out basic words while talking. I knew the word, I could hear it in my head, I just couldn't verbalize it.

Finally, the side effects became so bad that my doctor advised I discontinue them. Coming off of the medication was just awful. The dizziness lasted three to four months. But for myself, getting off it was worth it. That is certainly not true for everyone and I am still open to trying a different med if needed in the future.

Why am I sharing my story now? Because I'm hopeful. Hopeful there will be more understanding about and empathy for OCD now that people lived through Covid. I'm also hopeful a cure will be found for OCD, depression, and all of the other mental struggles people suffer silently with daily.

Until then, I hope my story educates those without OCD while also encouraging those who do. And for those who do...

Know it is not your fault.

Know you are not an embarrassment.

Know you are not alone.



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