Real life

What it feels like ... to have OCD

Odette Kennedy knows the hell of a life ruled by compulsive rituals

Cameron Diaz opens doors with her elbows to avoid germ-ridden handles; Megan Fox avoids public toilets and restaurant silverware; Jessica Alba unplugs all her appliances at night; and Charlize Theron has said she has to be 'incredibly tidy and organised or it messes with my mind'. What might seem idiosyncratic in the rich and famous could indicate a condition called obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Odette Kennedy, 23, a Johannesburg aftercare teacher, has lived with OCD for most of her life.

'Everyone gets a thought stuck in their head, or checks several times that they’ve locked a door, switched off a stove or packed their passport. But since primary school I’ve felt compelled to perform certain actions repeatedly, just to feel safe. At first I’d have to touch my body and take one step forwards, then one backwards, before walking on. It was awkward, but when other kids asked what was wrong with me, I couldn’t tell them. What would they think if I explained a little voice told me to do it, or something bad would happen?

'Later my sheets had to be smooth and my mattress flush against the wall.

'Since primary school I’ve felt compelled to do certain things repeatedly, just to feel safe'

I’d just get them right, when I’d have to climb out of bed and switch my light on and off, on and off! It was when I began rolling my eyes that my mom knew something was wrong, and she took me to a doctor and a psychologist. I was diagnosed with OCD and epilepsy, and put on meds.

‘OCD is associated with depression, and today the usual treatment combines antidepressants to correct serotonin levels, and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to change one’s thinking. In my case, medication alone seemed to work, and in high school I stopped even that. I probably shouldn’t have.

My obvious compulsions were under control but I developed new ones.

‘OCD wasn’t an issue when I was dating. Guys seldom picked up on it. But living with someone is different. When I met the man I wanted to marry, I waited a few months before telling him. I braced myself and said, ‘There are certain things that have to be a certain way, and I can’t control it.’ Robert’s amazing – he just accepted it. Later, we got engaged, and we’ve been married for two years now.

‘He patiently puts up with it when I do things such as making him get out of bed some nights so I can straighten our sheets. I try not to but when I don’t, I become stressed – the rituals give me a sense of control. I’ve decided to go for CBT treatment now. I may be used to living with OCD but I don’t want the man I love to have to deal with it too.’

FOR HELP WITH OCD, contact the South African Depression And Anxiety Group (SADAG) on ☎ 0800 567 567, SMS 31393 or visit www.sadag.org.