OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER

It's just this feeling that I have...

A person diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) experiences obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions refer to thoughts, images, or impulses that occur over and over again and feel out of the person's control. Compulsions are repetitive behaviours or thoughts that a person engages in to neutralise, counteract, or make their obsessions go away.

In addition, the obsessions and compulsions are time-consuming (at least one hour per day), and they get in the way of important activities in the person's life, such as working, going to school, or spending time with friends.

Though OCD is usually associated with hand washing and fear of catching a disease, there are actually many different "types" or themes seen in OCD. However, the most common discussed obsession is a fear of germs and contracting a disease.

Individuals struggling with these fears avoid touching surfaces that others have come in contact with - doorknobs, light switches, railings, etc. They might also become anxious when seeing something that might resemble body fluids from another person. For example, a red spot on a restaurant table is associated with blood (rather than a possible wine stain). Diseases that people with OCD become preoccupied with typically include HSV, herpes, and cancer.

Some individuals are also concerned with environmental contaminants - asbestosis or radiation - or chemical contaminants in general e.g., fear of getting sick from too many chemicals in their shampoo. Aren't these things we worry about from time to time? Of course. Have you seen all of the hand sanitiser dispensers popping up everywhere? Even if you don't have OCD, maybe you get a cough that you can't shake and you begin to worry something is wrong. The thought of throat cancer might cross your mind. However, fleeting thoughts and worries are not what's being described.

For individuals with OCD, these thoughts are present for hours at a time, day after day, along with intense feelings of anxiety. A second type of obsession seen in individuals with OCD is a fear of harm. Typically this is a fear of being responsible for something terrible happening because the individual feels he or she wasn't being careful enough. For example: "Did I remember to turn off the stove? If I left it on, could burn the house down..." Most of us have gone back to check our front door or the door of our cars to make sure they are locked. Going back 20, 30, 100 times, as is seen in people with OCD, is not the norm for the rest of us.

In his book, "Imp of the Mind," Lee Baer describes another group of obsessions common in people with OCD: taboo thoughts. What are the kinds of thoughts you would most like not to have? For people with OCD, these are the thoughts that crowd their minds:

- What if I lost control and turned my car into oncoming traffic?"
- "I looked at that kid for too long that does mean I am a paedophile?"
- "What if I go to church and have a blasphemous thought?"

Will I go to hell?

Another type of obsession seen in individuals with OCD is perfectionism. For the general public, the association between OCD and perfectionism is strong.

Individuals struggling with these obsessions are concerned with evenness, exactness, and symmetry. They become preoccupied with needing to know about every detail about every matter and feel that they should have a 100% perfect memory for everything they come across.

In many cases, these individuals spend enormous amounts of time trying to avoid making a mistake or letting anyone see any flaws. In addition, sometimes this kind of insistence on perfectionism contributes to problems with hearing.

The last group of obsessions commonly seen in individuals struggling with OCD include traditional superstitions; good and bad numbers or colours, not driving by cemeteries, or avoiding black cats for fear that something bad might happen to themselves or a loved one. If they see the number six, for example, they may feel that this is somehow associated with the devil ("666") and therefore something evil. As a result, the urge to "undo" this number becomes overwhelming.

Dr. Jeff Szymanski revised his PhD in Clinical Psychology from Northern Illinois University in 1997, and has a long track record of teaching and training. He is the author of the upcoming book, "The Perfectionist's Handbook," and is the Executive Director of the International OCD Foundation.

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