ARE WE BECOMING GENERATION OCD?

Recently, Kim Kardashian and Emily Blunt spoke of their battles with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Thanks to our rising anxiety levels – and inability to “switch off” – cases are on the rise. Here, writer Bryony Gordon tells of her own experience of OCD.
WHEN I WAS 12, AND MY WORRIES SHOULDN'T HAVE AMOUNTED TO NO MORE THAN WHETHER I WOULD MAKE THE NETBALL TEAM, I started to worry that I would die. I was worried, specifically, that I was going to die of AIDS, and then of Ebola — having watched a news report about an outbreak in sub-Saharan Africa. I worried and worried until it consumed almost all of my waking hours, and a great deal of my sleeping ones, too.

To deal with this, I started to wash obsessively. I would be on constant watch for cuts that any potential infection could make its way into. And while I didn’t have abrasions on my hands when the worries started, after a few weeks of washing them every 10 minutes, my skin had become so chapped that it cracked open, bleeding in the process. I was terrified. I washed my hands more to protect them, but they only bled more. Two months after my worries had started, I became almost housebound, petrified that the outside world would leave me diseased. The only place I could go was my head, and my head had become a prison.

I had no idea what was wrong with me, and neither did my increasingly distressed family. But almost 20 years on, we are all well aware of what left me bleeding and getting through several tubs of hand soap a week: obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD. You will have heard of it, and you may even have elements of it yourself.

Recently, the actress Emily Blunt told an interviewer all about hers. “I’ve started getting very superstitious and fixating on things,” she said. “I used to do it as a kid. I’d get these obsessive moments where I’d be in the car with my dad, and every time we went past a lamp-post I’d [start clucking six times], and my dad would be like, ‘What are you doing?’ And I’d go, ‘Sorry, I can’t... [cluck], stop.’”

Meanwhile, Kim Kardashian also spoke of her OCD. “I can’t take a shower unless the bathroom is absolutely spotless. I have a cleaner who comes three times a week, but I always do the cleaning on top of that.” Simply a case of a spoilt superstar? Actually, don’t knock her. OCD is often taken lightly, and in part we have our celebrity friends speaking of the tyranny of rearranging Pepsi cans (see one David Beckham) to thank for that. But I’ve learnt not to get irritated by celebrity references to OCD, because it is a serious mental illness that affects about three in 100 adults – and it’s getting worse.

Over the years, I’ve come to think that we live in a culture that almost encourages OCD. We are risk-averse, burnt out and anxious, desperate to get control over some aspect of our lives. Dr Cecilia D’Felice, a consultant psychologist and writer, agrees. “Fears about our jobs, not being able to switch off – all lead to a rise in anxiety, and one way this manifests itself is OCD. It can be anything from compulsively washing your hands to constantly checking Facebook. Social networking doesn’t help. If you have a tendency of obsessiveness, then there’s an addictive quality to it. If you’re constantly checking who has commented on your post, that fits with the OCD profile.”

For some, the disease can be devastating. In 2010, 40-year-old Samantha Hancox died from dehydration. She had chronic OCD and was incapable of looking after herself, spending up to 20 hours a day showering. Her elderly parents had been offered no help from social services. After her father was admitted to hospital, she stopped eating and drinking. Because OCD isn’t just washing your hands and checking that the stove isn’t on. It takes other forms, too: hoarding, praying, repeating special phrases to make sure harm doesn’t come to those around you (mine? “I’d rather I died than my family” – a great message to have going round your head 300 times a day).

Over the 20 years since OCD first made its home in my brain, it has taken on various guises. My colleagues say they know I’m in a bad place when I come to work with the iron in my bag. (Yes, I have done this – to stop me panicking that I’ve left it on!) I can
a combination of cognitive behavioural therapy, exercise and antidepressants, OCD can be managed (and it can even have its positive sides — my boyfriend loves how super-clean I am, and it has made me a perfectionist at work). I have learnt to recognise flash points that might cause one of my “OCD funks” — stress at work, a heavy night out drinking. I take a deep breath. I let my family know. They all rally round. I’m lucky, I know.

It also seems to be talked about more openly now, probably because more of us are suffering from it to some degree. Friends tell me about the extra half an hour they take to check they’ve double-locked the front door; one tells me she frequently gets halfway to work and has to turn back to check the back window isn’t open. This morning I saw a woman touch a seat seven times before she sat down, and while others might have labelled her a nutter, I saw her as a kindred spirit. I wanted to say, “Your number is seven? Hey, mine is three!”

So if you are checking the stove obsessively, or washing your hands until they’re raw, I want you to know: you can get help. You are not alone.

spend entire plane journeys checking under seats for hypodermic needles. I become terrified I might send an abusive message to someone at work, so spend hours in the evening checking the “sent” box of my email. When there’s nothing there, I check the trash bin to make sure I didn’t send one and then delete it.

“The same person’s mental illness” is what I have come to call OCD. You can see that the stove is off, but what if you nudged it while walking away? It’s the “what ifs” I have come to hate the most. What if, while I was out in the car, that bump in the road happened to be a child-shaped bump?

What if, while babysitting for a friend, I accidentally did something awful to their child? We all have these “what ifs”, and we let them pass. But the person with OCD can’t. We attach extraordinary significance to them. We question and question until there is nothing left but to doubt ourselves as decent human beings. However, through

DO YOU HAVE OCD TENDENCIES?
According to experts, cases of OCD are on the rise. But when do our “character quirks” become debilitating problems? Consultant psychologist Dr Cecilia D’Felice says, “Lots of people have mild OCD symptoms that are manageable, like repeatedly checking their phone, convinced they’ve missed a call or text. But it’s when that escalates — so you take three hours to leave the house because you’re flipping the light switches — that it becomes a problem. Sufferers can end up isolating themselves from friends, they lose their jobs and this increases stress levels, so their OCD gets worse.

“If it feels like a problem, speak to your doctor about cognitive behavioural therapy. It’s also worth doing lots of exercise to take the energy away from your brain. This leaves it with less power to feed your compulsions.”

Visit the South African Depression and Anxiety website, Sadag.org, for more info.