

My OCD Story

By Lucy W

I always felt particularly burdened. The earliest memories I have of childhood include obsessive compulsive disorder having its grips on me. By the age of 8 years old, most nights I was consumed with the fear of my mother dying. I would shake, head spinning in fear, mentally grasping for some, **any** relief. I would get physically ill most every night unless I was sleeping with her to make sure nothing was happening. My panic and fear most certainly would set in around bedtime. As the years of my childhood went by, my obsessive behaviors began to focus on my eating habits and by the age of twelve, I had full blown anorexia and bulimia.

Harm obsessions became a big part of my life at the age of thirteen. I had no idea why I couldn't stop thinking about suicide or dying. This was very confusing because, while I was certainly depressed and in pain, I knew I did not want to die.

From the ages twelve to fifteen, I had my first acute onset of an obsessive-compulsive disorder episode. I have what you would refer to as "Pure- O".

Once the harm thoughts began, they would not leave. I felt a strong urge to get rid of all sharp objects in the house. This meant, knives, hammers, pens, pencils, forks, anything I perceived as a potential weapon. I remember I had put a little pocketknife we had in a box, wrapped tape around it many times, and placed it in a pressure cooker under the sink. I did this because I was convinced that I would sleepwalk in the night and stab my boyfriend at the time. I was convinced I was schizophrenic or had a brain tumor. I had no idea why this was happening, as it was different than any symptom or theme I've had before. From then on all I could do was worry that maybe, inadvertently or on purpose, I would harm someone.

Enter something sharp into my eyesight: *What if I stab myself in the wrists with that?* Cue intrusive image. *Maybe I should just slit my throat, or maybe hers/his for that matter? What the f***?! Why would that come into my head?* Cue hyper fixation on my hands and how close they are to the object. *Do I want to grab it? Do I have control of myself?* Cue self-

checking. *I'll do whatever it takes to keep that from happening.*
Cue compulsion. *What is wrong with me.* This downward spiral had gained too much speed, I couldn't stop. *At least my loved ones are safe.*

This theme really stuck. I avoided watching tv, as there would most certainly be something my mind would latch onto. I couldn't cook, way too many poisoning/contamination/utensil triggers. I was trying to hide from my own mind, and in that endeavor my world became smaller and smaller. I was consumed by the mental compulsion of avoidance and reassurance. Google was my frenemy. I never liked what I found, and it only plunged me into hours of reading and obsessing.

Some days later, I found an OCD specialist. I walked into my first session believing I may be turned into the police, but I needed answers. After ten minutes of speaking, I thought to myself "maybe my life isn't over after all". I wasn't a freak; I wasn't the only person suffering in this very specific way. I wasn't dangerous, I wasn't a bad person. I have obsessive compulsive disorder; my brain has gotten carried away trying to protect me. The alarm system in my brain needed maintenance. He told me "I am sort of a mechanic for your brain". We put together a hierarchy and got started on exposures immediately. We started off small, as I was far down the rabbit hole of compulsions. I felt like a person again and not a shell of a body consumed by mental illness. I could sleep and eat again. OCD was always a bit in the background, but the battles became less frequent and intense. The exposure response prevention therapy was extremely effective.

The year to come after was a year of metamorphosis. I got my own apartment, and I was so happy that I had a chance to start again. It was the first time I had lived by myself in about four years. I was doing well for about a month and then the most intense OCD episode I had ever encountered hit me like a bat. I knew that the pandemic worsening and the winter coming would impact me, I just didn't know how much. I felt an impending doom a few weeks as my compulsions were winding up, tightening OCD's grip on me. Each time it hits, it hits different. However, some things always stayed the same, no sleep, no appetite, constant panic mode, episodes of derealization. The harm theme came back full force. My hands were raw from hand washing. I was convinced that was the only way to make sure drugs weren't on me or any surface I

touched. The fear was that a drug would absorb through my skin and cause me to have a psychotic break and violently attack people.

I felt like no one knew the level of my discomfort, how urgent it felt, how real. It got to the point where I just wanted to be strapped to a bed to make sure that nothing would happen.

That's the OCD trap, there's no way to achieve 100 percent certainty. The stakes will just get higher and higher. I was giving OCD everything it wanted, I stopped fighting against it. It took me, mind and body.

For that reason, I became the most ill I had ever been. My intense fear and mistrust of medication was holding me back.

My therapist decided I needed a more intensive therapy than his schedule allowed. I began an intensive treatment program of five sessions of therapy a week. This was hard work. Exposing yourself during an acute OCD episode can feel traumatic. The only emotion I felt was panic. After about two weeks I began to feel relief, we were making progress. I was pushing myself. I always wanted this, I always wanted wellness. I stayed in the intensive treatment program for about two months until I graduated to go back to more normal therapy. By the end, I was taking a micro dose of Lexapro and slowly working myself up to a therapeutic dose.

As the months went by on Lexapro, something incredible happened. The sinking feeling in my chest, the spikes, the panic attacks, they slowly started tapering off. I was able to dive into the exposures more without white knuckling. My chains began loosening, eventually falling off. I began to live again, the borders of my world expanding before my eyes. My lungs able to fill fully and produce a sigh of relief. I began enjoying food again, having full restful sleeps unencumbered by night sweats and horrific images. I was funny again; my edgy sense of humor had returned to me. I get excited about trying new things. I would say for the first time in my entire life I feel wellness, true wellness. The possibilities are endless for me.

The most important thing you must have during the road to recovery is self-compassion. OCD can make you feel like you're on a never-ending hamster wheel, running yourself bloody in a circle, with no eject button. I hope this story gives hope to those in the trenches of battle against their own mind. I am five years sober from hard drugs, I occasionally have a drink here and there. The contrast between where I am and where I have been is magnificent, and I am proud of that. Now the rest

of my life begins.

P.S. Lean into the anxiety!!!!