

# REATTRIBUTING THE CAUSE OF OCD

*It's just a chemical, so don't get polemical.<sup>1</sup>*

As the rhyme suggests, people often get “polemical” and attempt to dispute, defend, analyze, and control their obsessions. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is not caused by a weak mind, insanity, a sinful nature, or actual danger. Nor is it hopeless. Once you can reattribute repetitive thoughts and urges to your brain physiology and chemistry, you will be able to simply observe false thoughts—it is pointless to reason with them.

## BRAIN PHYSIOLOGY

Research suggests that there is a physical basis for OCD whether that is abnormalities in neurotransmitters or other causes:

- The part of the brain where error detection happens is shown to “overheat” in PET scans. Many people have had the thought “What if I jump?” when they are someplace high. Then they think “What a silly idea.” However, when the brain’s “error-detection circuit” is stuck, fear seems to make false thoughts repeat.
- There is a strong tendency for OCD to run in families. Malfunctioning (inherited) brain physiology may cause repetitive thoughts, and traumatic life experiences or stress may contribute to the content of obsessions. Thus, the “germ freak” may have had a near-death experience, and a hoarder may have been chronically deprived.

## ANSWERS THAT RELIEVE OCD CONCERNS

Having OCD can be thought of as a faulty set of brakes that makes it hard to stop repeating a thought or action. Just as slamming a set of defective brakes makes them fail, attempts to stop disturbing thoughts seem to make them stronger. People with OCD need to find ways to gently discourage their thoughts and habits. Mark any of the following questions that trouble you and study the answers to prepare yourself to make needed changes.

- \_\_\_ Does OCD mean I have a weak mind? It is a misconception to think that a “strong mind” can control obsessions and compulsions. Due to the brain physiology discussed above, people with OCD don't have an “off button” to stop anxiety-provoking thoughts. Attempts to use “will power” can sometimes make problems worse. However, a set of “brakes” can be built through learning techniques that postpone, modify, or focus away from disturbing thoughts and urges. Reattribute causes of OCD to physical factors rather than a lack of effort.
- \_\_\_ Does OCD mean I am crazy? OCD is entirely different from a thought disorder or psychosis. People with the latter speak in a way that makes no sense, think they are Napoleon, or hear voices. Although people with OCD may have the faulty belief that they can get sick from a speck of dirt, they are in touch with reality and know who, what, and where they are. OCD is considered an anxiety disorder because repetitive thoughts or habits attempt to relieve or cause anxiety. Reattribute OCD to overconcern, rather than a lack of concern with reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Reattributing is one of the “4-R’s of recovery” found in *Brain Lock* by Jeffrey Schwartz (HarperCollins, 1996). The mnemonic rhyme is from the same book.

- Do “awful” urges or thoughts mean I’m sinful? The greatest concern of some people with OCD is that they are committing a sin or jeopardizing their salvation. It is their very desire to be a good person that makes them worry about offending God. If this is your fear, remember that God is the master psychologist who knows the difference between obsessions that cause people to dwell on the very thoughts they dread and a lack of conscience. Reattribute OCD to being overconscientious rather than an absence of conviction and morals.
  - Does the return of obsessions and compulsions mean I won’t recover? After a few days of peace, people with OCD often start to worry, “What if those thoughts comes back?” It is the fear of obsessions that strengthens them. When a troubling thought or urge returns, it just means it is time for a “tune-up.” You can learn to use techniques that desensitize, postpone, modify, or focus away from disturbing thoughts and gradually change brain chemistry. Reattribute reoccurrence of obsessions or compulsions to the need to practice strategies that regulate unwanted thoughts.
  - How can I tell when my concerns are legitimate? Some people with OCD are slow to realize that they have a problem because they are convinced that their concerns are realistic. It is only when thoughts or rituals begin to interfere with their lives that they realize they have a problem. The facts about OCD concerns may surprise you:
    - Many people use public restrooms without worrying about disease and don’t get ill.
    - It is a medical fact that “fresh” urine is germ-free. In some cultures, people never wash their hands after going to the bathroom and do not get sick.
    - A curling iron can be left on all day without causing a fire.
    - Often, people are more at ease visiting someone whose house isn’t perfectly neat.
- You can distinguish exaggerated fears from realistic problems by using the Reality Check Chart below to compare your forecasts of “disaster” with those of friends or professionals.

<b>Reality Check Chart</b>		
<b>Directions:</b> List all the consequences you fear and rate how much distress each concern causes you (0–10 units). Then, rate the chance of its happening (0–100%).		
<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Level of Distress 0–10 units</b>	<b>Chance of Happening 0–100%</b>
<b>Examples:</b>		
If I touch a doorknob without washing my hands, I’ll get a disease.	8	1%
I might lose control and stab my child.	10	0%
People will think I’m a slob if my house isn’t in perfect order.	7	3%

Adapted from chart in *Stop Obsessing!* by Edna Foa and Reid Wilson (Bantam Books, 1991), p. 59.