

Worrying

‘Suppose she got lost,’ said Sarah. ‘Or a fox got her,’ said Percy. ‘I want my mummy,’ said Bill.

– *Martin Waddell, Owl Babies*

Hi, my name’s Joe, just Joe, not Joseph, although I’m always getting called Joseph. I’m 16 now and I live in the south of England. I come from a fairly ordinary and functioning family and have good friends who I see regularly. I’m quite a confident person (well, now I am, I never used to be) and I love music. I’m currently looking for more space to store my hundreds of CDs, from Aphex Twin to Frank Zappa. I also like art and I’m hoping to go to the Saatchi Gallery in London with my friends after my GCSEs. Oh, and until recently I have suffered from OCD.

But don’t worry, I’m very safe and there’s no cause for alarm. OCD isn’t like the mental illness that you see in horror films. I don’t run a creepy motel, I’ve never scrawled ‘RED RUM’ on my bedroom wall, and I would never be rude about my vicar’s mother. I’m actually just an ordinary guy. OCD is *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, so it only affects the things that you do, not the way that you are or the way that you feel (except for the fact that it can stress you out at times). Basically

OCD makes you over-concerned with things that other people might see as trivial or perhaps wouldn't have thought about at all, like turning off the oven or making sure that your hands are clean.

OCD is something which I developed from a young age and at first it meant that I was overly concerned about cleanliness, but then I moved on to some slightly more obscure concerns. Like I said, I'm very safe and OCD sticks out from the stereotype of mental illness like a sore thumb. OCD is a completely unique illness; it cannot easily be compared to other mental illnesses. In fact we all have some characteristics of OCD. Anyone who has ever checked twice if they've left their oven on, or anyone who has ever worried about the sell-by date of that yoghurt they just ate, is experiencing similar symptoms as someone with OCD. OCD is excessive worrying (see Appendix 1 for the expanded definition of OCD). However, it is only considered OCD when it has started to disrupt your life. I began to develop OCD around the age of nine. As a normal child going to an ordinary school this was very hard for me. OCD is also a completely irrational disorder, especially as I was a nine-year-old with nothing much to worry about except my next spelling test. My mind became fixed on worrying thoughts and instead of having a good time with my friends I was often sat on my own hoping that the solvents in the wallpaper paste wouldn't be the end of me.

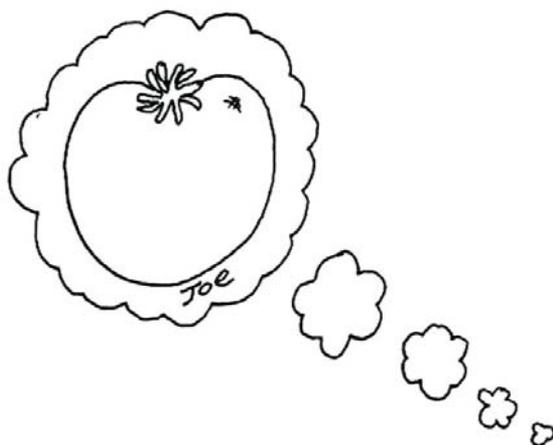
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder does exactly what it says on the tin: it gives you obsessive thoughts, compelling you to do irrational things. At this time these obsessive thoughts were the fear of contamination or as I, the nine-year-old child, would say, 'poisoning'. However, later on, I developed even more irrational compulsions.

OCD affects up to 2 in 100 people (according to OCD-UK) including British footballer Paul Gascoigne, the singer Gabrielle, and probably many other famous people who are unwilling to admit it. Two in 100 may not seem like a lot but if these statistics are true it would mean that in my year of 300 children it is likely that five other children suffered from it, and in my school of around 1500, 30 people suffer from it. That's a whole busload of people worrying throughout the day.

The exact process of OCD is very hard to explain to someone who has never experienced it. When I try to explain it to people, their reaction, although sympathetic, is often similar to my reaction when arachnophobics try to explain to me why they do not like spiders, but here goes: it is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, where my mind will try to not worry about something and therefore does worry about it. A lot. The best example in an 'ordinary' person's life that I can give you is this:

Do not think about tomatoes; try really hard to get all thoughts of bright red tomatoes out of your head. Why would one want to think about tomatoes anyway? Ignore the tomatoes and remove them from your mind.

Whilst reading that sentence I know that the one thing that you were probably thinking about the most was tomatoes. For most people this is not a problem. As long as no one is talking directly about the thing that they do not want to think about, they go on with their normal lives. However, for the OCD sufferer this is not the case. The thoughts would stay with them all day. This plague of thoughts is another thing that is hard to explain to an 'ordinary' person, but the most similar phenomenon that I can think of is having a song stuck in your head. We've all had times at school, college or work when we



are trying to mind our own business, but can't stop humming Britney Spears' 'Oops I Did It Again'.

It's the same feeling of unwanted thoughts pestering their way into your everyday thoughts. But they weren't thoughts of tomatoes. In fact, unwanted tomato-related thoughts aren't to my knowledge an existing form of OCD. People can have thoughts that something might infect them, because they have failed to avoid infection, or that they have to fulfil ridiculous rituals of touching things a certain amount of times, or walking with certain steps. I would get a thought in my mind, a worry, and that thought would not go away. The thought would plague me all day long. It kept getting at me, all day long; it was unbearable. I COULD NOT TAKE IT! Eventually, after much futile objection, I allowed the thought to overpower me and force me to do whatever action it was asking me to do. It was like a young child whining and whining until it got its own way, until the parent screams, 'FINE, YOU CAN LEAVE YOUR VEGETABLES, BUT JUST THIS ONCE!', 'FINE I'LL BUY YOU THAT TOY, BUT JUST THIS ONCE!' or 'FINE, YOU CAN STAY UP A BIT

PAST YOUR BED TIME, BUT JUST THIS ONCE!'. But any good parent knows that the more you keep saying 'just this once', 'just this once' to a child the harder it gets to refuse their requests. I kept saying 'just this once', 'just this once' to OCD and in the end it took a tight grip around me and could never be told 'no'. It was like a spoilt little brat that would always get its own way. The system was simple: Thoughts = Actions.

No questions, no arguments. It was as though these thoughts combined with my OCD were totalitarian dictators: what they say goes and I'd have no say in it whatsoever. I was a slave to these thoughts and actions – thoughts and actions which have varied as I have grown up. My first worries are detailed in the next chapter.

Summary

- Everybody has some irrational obsessions like checking twice that they've locked the door, or being a bit fussy with sell-by dates, but it's when these things get in the way of your normal life and are distressing for you that you might have OCD.
- OCD is very hard to explain to people who don't have OCD.
- OCD can gain power over you. When you try not to think about your obsession you can't take your mind off it.
- OCD is not rare; in fact up to two per cent of the population suffer from it in some way.