

# Introduction

Are obsessions and compulsions stopping you?

Maybe you've never thought about it in exactly this way. After all, your life probably hasn't come to a complete halt. But the fact that you're reading these words says that in some way obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is stopping you, whether it's keeping you from going where you want to go, preventing you from doing what you want to do, taking up time you'd rather spend on something else, or just causing you discomfort.

The way to stop obsessions and compulsions from stopping you is to work your way through the steps in this book.

Welcome to what I hope will be both a rewarding and a challenging journey for you. *Rewarding* because it is likely you will gain tremendous improvement from practicing the skills you'll learn in this book. Just imagine: No more fighting obsessional thoughts. No more avoidance. No more relying on compulsive behaviors to cope. Fewer restrictions on your day-to-day life. Sounds nice, doesn't it?

*Challenging* because learning to use the skills that will help you overcome OCD requires practice and (gulp) some hard work. Have you tried to get help before? Maybe treatment didn't work out. Are you currently seeing a therapist? Maybe it's difficult to find a professional who knows how to properly treat OCD. Maybe you've thought about getting help but have never done so. Unfortunately, the majority of people who have OCD never get help from a qualified mental or behavioral health professional—which is one of the main reasons I've written this book. This may be your first attempt to do anything about your OCD symptoms. Whatever the case may be, by selecting this workbook you've chosen a program that has half a century of scientific research to back it up. I have conducted some of this research and have also worked with countless people with OCD. So I understand this problem and how to treat it as well as anyone does. In writing this book I've drawn on state-of-the-art scientific knowledge as well as my clinical expertise to make the most effective treatment for OCD—a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) called *exposure and response prevention*—accessible to you in the most user-friendly format available.

Why have I written a second edition of this workbook? Exciting and influential scientific advancements in the treatment of OCD since the first edition was published have begun to transform how we think about and treat obsessions and compulsions. For instance, we

now know about the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT (“ACT” is pronounced as a single word, not as separate initials), which provides a fresh angle from which to understand and address OCD. ACT emphasizes the futility of *fighting* against obsessions and anxiety and instead stresses the importance of changing how you relate to these and other unwanted private experiences so they don’t stop you from enjoying the moment or doing whatever is important to you. Research I have done shows how ACT can enhance (but not *replace*) exposure and response prevention treatment to give you new hope if you’ve struggled to benefit from this approach in the past. Accordingly, one way I’ve updated this book is by introducing ACT techniques to help you get the most out of this treatment program.

This new edition also incorporates advancements in the neuroscience of exposure and response prevention. Research on how the brain learns, for example, contradicts the traditional idea that habituation to a feared stimulus is most important in exposure therapy. What’s most crucial is that exposure cultivates new learning (such as “bathrooms are safe”) to override obsessional thinking (such as “bathrooms will make me sick”). This type of learning is called *inhibitory learning*, and research has led to big changes in how therapists conduct exposure and response prevention to make sure it is optimized—for example, by carefully setting up each exposure practice to challenge your obsessional fear and then repeating exposures in many different situations rather than worrying about whether levels of anxiety diminish during the exercise. We are now using numerous “inhibitory learning strategies” in our clinic to further boost exposure and response prevention programs. I knew, therefore, that I also had to integrate them within Steps 7 and 8 on doing exposure therapy in this book.

In contrast to many other books available on this subject, the techniques I describe here have all been researched extensively in well-designed clinical trials. It’s a scientific fact that when the methods described in this book are put to use in a therapeutic way, people generally experience a significant decrease in their OCD symptoms and an increased ability to move ahead with life. Basically, I have taken the strategies that are proven to be useful in therapy and adapted them in a self-help format for you. I will be your coach—teaching you all the tricks of the trade to help you overcome this problem. I will also be your cheerleader—giving you the encouragement you need to persevere.

How serious is your problem? Perhaps OCD is a “sometimes thing” for you, getting in your way only in certain situations: you have to use a public restroom; you’re the last person to leave work and responsible for locking up; you see a knife, a baseball bat, or a vulnerable person or pet that triggers an unwanted thought about committing violence. Or perhaps obsessions and compulsions are constant companions that interfere with the things that are most important to you: relationships, family, your religious and spiritual life, work, and other areas. Maybe you have persistent unwanted sexual thoughts and doubts or fears that you’ve committed a sin or made a terrible mistake; or you have an ever-present worry that you’re responsible for causing something awful. Perhaps things never seem to be “just right,” and you feel the need to order or arrange them more perfectly. Regardless of how often you experience trouble with obsessions and compulsions, I hope you will join me in this 10-step journey toward health, freedom, and more engagement with life. I think you’ll find it worthwhile every step of the way.

## Who Am I?

My first exposure to OCD came in 1994 as a PhD student in clinical psychology at the University of Memphis. As a therapist in training I was assigned to work with a very sweet and gentle woman who was afraid she would go berserk and murder her family in their sleep. She kept all the knives locked away and constantly prayed for God to keep her from acting on her senseless thoughts. Sure, I had read books and research papers about OCD, but nothing had prepared me to hear about this problem firsthand and to see how much this woman was suffering. Under the supervision of my professors, I eventually helped her overcome her obsessions using exposure and response prevention. My interest in OCD was piqued, and I decided to learn more by conducting my own research, gaining more clinical experience, and teaming up with other clinicians and scientists working in the OCD field.

I was fortunate to finish my doctoral training and begin my professional career at the Center for Treatment and Study of Anxiety in Philadelphia (now part of the University of Pennsylvania) under the mentorship and supervision of Drs. Edna Foa, Michael Kozak, and Martin Franklin, some of the world's leading experts on OCD. The 4 years I spent learning about this problem by evaluating, treating, and studying people who suffered with it were invaluable to my career as a clinician and scientist.

In 2000, I moved to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and founded the Mayo OCD and Anxiety Disorders Clinic—a treatment and research program with a staff of dedicated psychiatrists and psychologists. People with OCD came to Mayo from across the United States and around the world. I personally consulted with and treated hundreds of patients and trained and supervised numerous therapists wanting to learn how to help their clients with OCD. I also wrote and edited my first three OCD books (for professionals) while at Mayo, putting what I had learned through my research, training, and clinical work in print for others to benefit from.

In 2006, I moved to the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, where I am Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience. I direct the UNC Anxiety and Stress Disorders Clinic, which is an outpatient clinic that primarily serves people with OCD and related problems with anxiety. My role is to train and supervise PhD students, the psychologists of tomorrow, teaching them how to understand, study, and provide treatment for OCD. Our team is working hard conducting research on the prevention and treatment of OCD so that we can minimize the suffering associated with this problem. Among our accomplishments are the development of a couple-based treatment program for OCD via collaboration with Dr. Donald Baucom, an expert in the field of couple therapy. Our collaboration with Drs. Michael Twohig in the field of ACT and Joanna Arch in the field of inhibitory learning have also helped us synergize exposure and response prevention for OCD. In 2012, I became editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*, which publishes scientific research and clinical papers on OCD. Furthermore, I have a small private practice that I devote almost exclusively to treating people with OCD who come to Chapel Hill from across the region for my services.

To put it simply, I love my work. I appreciate people's stories and enjoy the challenge of trying to understand each new individual's obsessions and compulsions. What's most

rewarding to me, though, is helping people like you apply the principles of exposure and response prevention to take back their lives from obsessive thoughts and fears, senseless rituals, and anxiety. Given my interest in and love of this work, and the extraordinary training and experience I've been so fortunate to have as a clinician and a scientist, writing a workbook for people with OCD seemed like the best thing I could do for all the people I can't work with face to face. I hope you'll find that this book contains everything science and art have to offer.

## How Can This Workbook Help You?

Experts in the field of psychology and psychiatry agree that exposure and response prevention is the most effective form of treatment for OCD. It has been studied with thousands of patients in centers around the world. The probability that you will get at least some improvement is 60–70%, and if you complete a course of treatment, you are likely to get a 50–70% decrease in your OCD symptoms. This also usually translates to significant improvements in your quality of life. While I can't offer you a guarantee of success, I can say that if you work hard, it's a good bet you'll benefit from this form of treatment.

In my work with patients and in my research, one thing has become very clear about how best to overcome OCD: it's a step-by-step process. The exposure and response prevention form of CBT that is so effective succeeds precisely because you build on your own successes as you work your way through the therapy. That is why this workbook, unlike others you'll find in your local bookstore, is written in a step-by-step format, with the 10 steps corresponding to the stages of treatment. At each step you'll be doing exercises and practices designed to teach you basic strategies for overcoming problems with obsessions and compulsions. I encourage you to have a pencil or pen handy as you read and to make copies of the blank worksheets and forms for your personal use so you can continue to use them in the coming months (see the end of the table of contents for information about downloading and printing).

This is a self-help book—meaning it's designed for you to use on your own—but it's not intended to *replace* treatment by a qualified mental health practitioner should you need professional help. You can use this book in any of these ways:

- *As a supplement to working with a therapist.* In fact, one of my motives for writing this book was to have a good resource for my own patients and clients to use as they progress through treatment. If you've tried therapy without much success, it may be that your therapist is not a specialist in the treatment of OCD. If you've found a clinician that you like and trust—a critical ingredient in effective therapy—you may want to share this book with him or her to enrich the therapeutic relationship, giving you and your therapist a common language for talking about problems with OCD. As a companion to your treatment, this workbook can move your therapy forward and give it some structure.

- *For help with OCD symptoms that do not require ongoing professional care.* One reason many people do not get professional help for obsessions and compulsions is that they have what we call a “subclinical” form of the disorder, meaning their problems are not severe

enough to qualify for an official diagnosis of OCD. That doesn't mean, however, that their lives aren't impaired—or that they could not benefit from improvement. In Step 1 I'll help you get a feel for whether your problems may be more serious than you had thought and whether you should see a mental health professional for a diagnostic evaluation. If not, self-directed treatment with this workbook may very well be appropriate for you. If you're feeling depressed (which is common among people with OCD) or considering suicide, of course you should see a doctor right away.

- *If you have problems with OCD and are looking for additional emotional support.* The stories and examples you will read here—involving composites of real people, real symptoms, and real successes I have observed—will help you see that you are not alone in your struggle to find your way out of OCD. The people I counsel often feel ashamed of the symptoms that plague them, *despite the fact that they are not to blame for the intrusion of obsessions and compulsions in their lives.* Shame and guilt are obstacles to improvement that get swept away the more you see that OCD comes uninvited into innocent people's lives.

- *To facilitate your support network.* This workbook can help your friends, family members, and mental health professionals gain a fuller knowledge of OCD, better understand what you are going through, and learn some tools for helping you manage your problems.

If you are one of the many people with OCD who never get to see a mental or behavioral health professional—much less a professional with the degree of training and experience needed to successfully help people with OCD—I am pleased to have the opportunity to teach you about OCD and start you on your journey to recovery. If you are using this book while also working with a therapist, thank you for including me in your treatment. I am delighted to lend a helping hand. If you are a therapist who doesn't have a lot of experience with OCD, it is my pleasure to serve as a guide. I hope this book will be helpful in your work.

## What's Inside?

It's normal to have all sorts of different feelings about starting a new treatment program. On the one hand, you feel stuck; but on the other hand, change can produce anxiety. You'd love to leave OCD in the dust, but what will it take to get there? With all of these mixed emotions, you might be feeling confused and vulnerable. The treatment program in this book will empower you by helping you understand your feelings better. It will also help you become more flexible in the face of fear and anxiety so that these experiences don't stop you from moving toward your goals and values in life.

This workbook is divided into three parts. Part I, which contains Steps 1, 2, and 3, will help you learn about the symptoms of OCD, their causes, and the available treatments. There are several different *types* of obsessions and compulsions; in Part I, I will help you learn more about your particular subtype(s) so that you can tailor the treatment techniques to meet your specific needs. Finally, you will learn how to understand OCD in a way that will help you get the most out of the treatment strategies you'll use in later steps.

In Part II you will prepare yourself to use effective treatment strategies for OCD.



Specifically, in Step 4 you'll develop your treatment plan, and in Step 5 you'll complete some exercises to help yourself stay motivated to do the challenging work of exposure and response prevention.

Part III is the heart and soul of the workbook. In Steps 6, 7, 8, and 9, I will give you step-by-step instructions to help you apply the CBT techniques that are so effective in the treatment of OCD—exposure, response prevention, cognitive therapy, and ACT. Together, these techniques will help you change the thinking and behavioral patterns that keep OCD alive. In Step 10 I will help you develop plans for maintaining your improvement over the long term so that you can put your problems with OCD behind you for good. The illustrative examples, worksheets, and forms I provide will help you get the most out of this program. Each step in the workbook builds on the previous ones. So, for example, the self-analysis you conduct in Step 2 will be used in Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6 as you design and implement your treatment program. For this reason, I strongly recommend reading and working through the steps in order.

So, now that you know what lies ahead, let's get on with the program. Step 1 begins your journey toward a better, richer life—one in which you're spending less time fighting anxiety and more time working, playing, and just being you.