

Using Scripture to Address Common Patterns of Thinking in OCD



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

Ethan was ecstatic to be a new father, but he was also plagued with thoughts that he might harm his newborn son. He had struggled with obsessions and compulsions related to germs and contamination in the past, but he hadn't been troubled lately with intrusive thoughts. Until the baby came. Specifically, he had the recurrent thought, "How can I be sure that I didn't molest my son when I changed his diaper?" Or a similar thought, "How do I know that I'm not a pedophile and won't sexually abuse my son?" These thoughts were so distressing and repulsive to Ethan that he began to avoid changing his son's diaper and bathing him.

The intrusive and recurrent thoughts, impulses, and images associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are varied and cause great distress and anxiety to the sufferer. Here are some examples of what you may hear from strugglers like Ethan regarding the thoughts and images that bombard them:

- I will contract a deadly illness from touching the doorknob.
- I may pick up a steak knife and stab my wife during dinner.
- The house may burn down because I forgot to turn off the stove.
- I will stand up in the middle of the sermon and yell obscenities at my pastor.

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- I inadvertently poisoned my child while making them lunch.
- I didn't read the Scripture passage from this morning's devotional time carefully and reverently enough.
- That bump I experienced while driving may have been a pedestrian I hit by mistake.
- I can't watch TV channels ending in the number 3.
- When signing my name on a credit card receipt, I fear that I will write obscenities and curses against God.
- The saliva in my mouth is contaminated.
- I want that second cup of coffee too much—it must be an idol of the heart.

Each of these thoughts or images is unwanted. Each is associated with great distress and anxiety, which leads to repeated and compulsive actions or mental rituals to neutralize or counteract the anxiety associated with the thought.¹ The counselor not only needs to be aware of the varied and sometimes idiosyncratic thoughts a person may have, but also needs to explore with them the deeper patterns of thinking and cognitive appraisals present in recurring types of intrusions.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to describe several commonly occurring patterns of thinking present in people who experience debilitating obsessions and compulsions, and second, to show how Scripture speaks to these deeper beliefs, desires, and fears. The goal of counseling, then, is to stimulate a growing trust in God, who is greater than our fears. In that sense, the scope of this article is intentionally limited to addressing the cognitive aspects of OCD and will not present a full counseling methodology.² But it's hard for OCD sufferers to fight their compelling fears without embracing their ultimate safety in Jesus Christ. It is on this helping priority that this article will focus.

1. For an overview of the experiential and cyclical dynamics of OCD, see Michael R. Emler, "Scrupulosity: When Doubts Devour," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:3 (2019): 11–40. While that article focuses on scrupulosity (religious or moral obsessions and compulsions), the dynamics I describe apply across the varied presentations of OCD.

2. For example, in helping someone combat their obsessions and compulsions, it's critical to practically help them push back against their fears by asking them to refrain from engaging in the compulsive practices and rituals they use to ameliorate their anxiety. We encourage people to "do the opposite" of what their fears are compelling them to do.

Belief Patterns Associated with OCD

People who struggle with OCD usually have certain patterns of thinking in common.³ These are referred to as *belief domains* and include the following:

- inflated responsibility: the belief that a person has the power to cause or prevent subjectively crucial, negative outcomes
- overimportance of thoughts: the belief that the mere presence of a thought indicates that it is important
- overestimation of threat: an exaggeration of the probability or severity of harm
- importance of controlling one's thoughts: the belief that it is both possible and important to exert complete control over intrusive thoughts, images, and impulses
- need for absolute certainty: the intolerance of uncertainty and the difficulty of functioning in ambiguous situations
- perfectionism: the belief that there is a perfect solution to every problem, that doing something perfectly (i.e., mistake-free) is not only possible but also necessary, because even minor mistakes will have serious consequences

While not all of these belief domains are prominent in every person, I find that these tendencies hold true in the lives of those I counsel who suffer with life-dominating obsessions and compulsions. You can see that they have some thematic overlap and hover around issues of over-responsibility, certainty, and control.

Limitations of these belief domains. These domains are salient for our understanding of OCD, but they have an important limitation. They don't highlight the reality that all human beings are God's image bearers who always live before his eyes. As Paul highlights in Acts 17:28, "In him we live and move and have our being." Further, these thought domains don't consider how other aspects of our human experience—our sin nature, our fallen and weak bodies, our genetics, our relationships, our life circumstances, our choices, broader sociocultural factors,

3. David A. Clark, *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for OCD and Its Subtypes*, 2nd ed. (The Guilford Press, 2020), 115.

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