

Living with... Obsessive Compulsive Disorder



India Haylor, 38, on her battle with the persistent rituals that took over her life

My OCD started in my teens. As I child, I was fairly carefree, but when my adolescent hormones kicked in, I was anxious about everything. Inexplicably, I became obsessed with the number four, and I would have to do everything four times – from getting dressed, to turning light switches on and off.

‘Over time, I found myself creating patterns and rules I felt I had to stick to or something awful would happen. Doing things once or twice was fine, four was good, but repeating it three times meant something bad would occur – like my family being in a car crash – and it would be all my fault.

‘My parents had no idea how extreme my thoughts were and assumed I was just your typical, angry teenager. But it was more than that – I worried constantly and my behaviour seriously affected my life. I was always late for everything as I spent so long doing checks and rituals, and I couldn’t study for my A-levels as I became obsessed with pacing up and down, as well as opening and closing text books a certain number of times.

‘I knew it would seem crazy to others, but I couldn’t help it – I honestly felt terrible things would happen and this was the only way to prevent them.

‘Despite all that, I managed to pass my exams and get into university, but a strong desire to be the perfect daughter for my parents and the perfect student for my teachers

exacerbated my OCD and made my need for control greater than ever, which fuelled my persistent rituals.

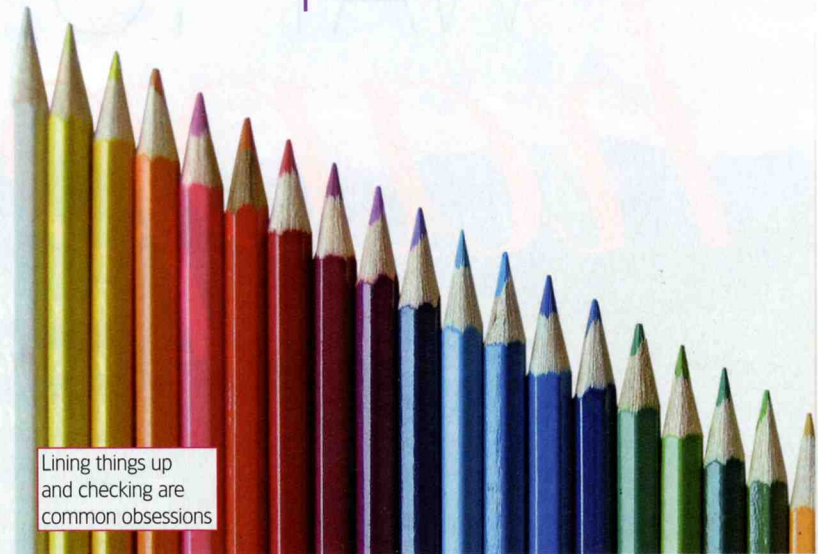
‘So I was amazed when I turned 21 and met a man who liked me just the way I was. He was really laid-back – I’ve since found out lots of OCD sufferers gravitate towards partners like this – and to him, my “quirks” were endearing.

‘We married soon after, but my obsessions quickly began to drive a wedge between us. He would go to bed, but I would lock myself in the bathroom touching the taps a certain number of times, or going through complex counting patterns I had set myself. Worse, I was plagued with thoughts that he would get ill unless I kept up my rituals.

‘Eventually, he encouraged me to get professional help. But it was a disaster – the therapist told me I was just a natural perfectionist and that my worrying was part of my personality. Without proper help, my relationship buckled under the strain of my obsessions, and we sadly divorced when I was 29.

Turning point

Then, later that year, I read an article about a woman who constantly had to check things, and had been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. They described it as a mental illness where the brain gets stuck on particular thoughts, resulting in compulsive behaviours



Lining things up and checking are common obsessions

– I immediately recognised myself. I started researching everything I could about OCD and what I could do to beat it. I visited doctors and specialist therapists, who helped me learn to manage my condition using therapy and medication.

‘I was put on Prozac for six months – antidepressants are quite often prescribed for anxiety disorders – and during my therapy sessions, I learnt to accept I couldn’t always be in control. I also discovered that OCD can affect anyone and isn’t my fault.

Accepting myself

Nearly 10 years later, I’ve come to accept OCD is just something I was

predisposed to from birth and was probably triggered by puberty. It’s something I live with – like being left-handed or wearing glasses. I no longer have an obsession with the number four, although I can still get anxious. But when I feel the old obsessive thoughts coming back, I know I can control them better now.

‘I’ve found comfort helping other sufferers, and trained in rational emotive behaviour therapy, which is often used to treat the condition. I also set up the OCD Centre (www.ocdcentre.com), where therapists with the problem, like me, work with fellow sufferers. Now, I can help others become free.’ □

OCD: The facts

What is it? An anxiety disorder, sufferers experience repetitive, unwanted and distressing thoughts. This can lead to a compulsion to complete a ritual, often to stop a perceived threat occurring.

What causes it? The cause is unknown, but an imbalance in the brain may be to blame. It can also be influenced by stress, genetics or illness.

What’s the best treatment? Rational emotive behaviour therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy have had much success. They work on confronting fears, and emotional and behavioural disturbances.

Where can I find out more? See your GP for a proper diagnosis, and referral. Visit www.ocdaction.org.uk for support and information.