

5 Realities of Life When Your Brain Wants You to Murder

When you hear "OCD," you probably think about a serious anxiety disorder with physical compulsions, or about how wacky you are for wanting to keep your bookshelf alphabetized, depending on your level of knowledge. But there's another, more obscure form, known as Primarily Obsessional OCD, which can give you strong, repetitive urges to murder your loved ones. Not quite as cute and approachable as the TV character Monk, is it? Lydia was diagnosed with it as a teenager. Here's what she's learned in the years since.

#5. There Is a Form of OCD That Makes You Want to Kill

I want you to look around the room you're in. What's the most dangerous thing you see? Unless you're in a militia compound, it's probably a letter opener, a pen, or some undercooked chicken. Whatever it is, I've probably thought about killing my entire family with it. Hi, welcome to my article!

This is due to a form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder called "Pure O", which sounds like a drug Phillip K. Dick invented, but is actually a form of OCD that manifests as repetitive and extreme thoughts. They're most often violent or sexual in nature, but they can run the gamut from a religious person worrying that they're being blasphemous, to wondering if your partner is cheating on you. In my case, the intrusive thoughts were violent, although I guess a lot of people would also consider mass familial murder to be blasphemous.

It started when I was 15. I had been having disturbing thoughts for a couple of months and had been showing signs of anxiety for years, but for whatever reason, they hit me especially hard one day. I was watching an Ellen DeGeneres routine and I suddenly thought to myself, "Hey, what if you killed your entire family?"

And I couldn't shake that thought. It kept crashing into me, over and over, like I was in a murderous wave pool. I started thinking about how easy it would be to do it -- I knew there were knives in the house, and OCD has a way of making the absurd seem horrifically feasible. By the time Ellen started making a joke about petting her cat, I was fighting back an actual, powerful urge to stab everyone present. This may not be an entirely normal response to Ms. DeGeneres' comedy.

Before I started therapy, I would have these urges two to three times a day. Every day. As you can probably imagine, it's difficult to muddle through your morning when every time you pick up a pen, you think about putting it through someone's throat. And most people would have no idea anything was off, because it was all in my head ... apart from the anxiety attacks, but we'll get to that in a minute. Having a purely mental disorder can be extremely isolating, because when most people can't see symptoms of a disorder, they forget it exists, or may not even know about it in the first place. You might as well insist you're haunted by malevolent fairies, for all society is concerned.

#4. You Don't Act On It, but You Still Hate Yourself

Unless your last name is Doom, you're probably not comfortable with the constant desire to go on a stabbing spree. And that's where the other half of the thought process, rumination, kicks in. When there's something big coming up in your life -- an exam, a job interview, a video game console launch -- you end up thinking about it more than you should. You know you've done as much as you can to prepare by studying, proofing your resume, or ending all of your meaningful relationships and quitting your job, but there's a nagging doubt that you could somehow do more. The rumination phase is like that, only you're questioning whether you really have a mental illness or are legitimately a horror villain.

Logically, I know I'm a decent person. I help little old ladies across the street, I donate to charity, and when I get the urge to push my mom down a flight of stairs, I don't act on it. In fact, as far as I know, no person with Pure O has ever acted on their violent impulses. But you become convinced that you're a terrible person simply for having the thoughts. If people were judged for their thoughts alone, then we'd all be doing life in a sci-fi dystopian mind prison, because literally everyone has planned a bank heist at some point. But when you're 15 and unwillingly plotting mass murder, you're sure that plugging your symptoms into Google will result in the FBI knocking on your door with a Hannibal Lecter mask.

It's difficult to look at the situation rationally, because your own mind is working against you, like how a depressed person can't fully appreciate life, or how people who wear Axe believe that they don't smell like a Russian landfill. When nasty ideas hit you that hard and that often, you don't start thinking that you're a hero for resisting them -- you think you're a villain for even having them. This line of thinking is the product of about a million cognitive biases. You can get over these biases, but it isn't easy, as you'd know if you've ever read an argument on the Internet.

This started to affect my life in all sorts of ways. School was awful, because being in a stressful public place around friends and teachers allowed the intrusive thoughts to really pour it on. The last place you want to have an anxiety attack is high school, since teenagers are known for shunning peers who wear the wrong style shoes, let alone those compulsively plotting their demise. But my concern about having an anxiety attack at school made me anxious about going to school, which made it more likely that I would have an attack, and so on. It was an Ouroboros of suck.

I hadn't told my parents yet, because I didn't want them to take me out back and drown the monster they'd spawned. So it looked like I was just another bratty teenager cutting class to hit the pizza parlor ... or whatever it is that cool, delinquent kids do these days. Heroin?

I eventually discovered a way of dealing with the anxiety attacks, but it was about the worst method possible: I would scratch my wrists until they bled. It was almost instinctual, because the physical pain would distract me from my thoughts and calm me down faster. This escalated to the point where I'd put knives on my wrist. I didn't press down because I was afraid it would hurt, but the thought of slitting my wrists and bleeding out to end my struggle with my own brain was there. This got rid of the intrusive thoughts in the short term, but constant suicide attempts aren't a good way to pass the time, unless you're trapped in a Groundhog Day scenario. And even then, it's probably better to study piano or something.

#3. Stopping the Thoughts Is Not Only Impossible, but Harmful

People go to therapy for a variety of reasons, but anxiety attacks and suicide attempts brought on by the urge to rearrange your family tree with extreme prejudice -- well, that gets you the express lane.

I had some unrealistic expectations for my therapy, in the sense that the passengers on the Titanic had some unrealistic expectations for their spring getaway. My first assumption was that I'd be issued some anti-crazy drugs and waltz out with a prescribed ticket to Sanitytown, population: a reasonable number. But I didn't even fill my prescription because the thought of messing with my brain chemistry terrified me (that's right, anxiety made me afraid to take my anti-anxiety medication). That left talk therapy, and while it was a life-saver, it was also a slow and difficult process.

That's because your first instinct for fighting Pure O is horribly wrong, like how pop culture seems sure that you can fight a shark by punching it in the nose. This instinct is called thought blocking, and it takes five seconds to prove it doesn't work:

Starting now, don't think about an elderly naked man in a clown wig.

Don't!

Don't think about an elderly naked man in a clown wig, even if you see sentences with the words "elderly," "naked," "man," "clown," and "wig" in them. Whoa, are you thinking about him right now? Why? Those were just individual words, not strung together toward any particular meaning. Stop thinking about that weird old clown dude. Even if an elderly man cracks open a Naked Juice next to you, then wigs out because some clown replaced his green health sludge with normal sewer slime. No clowns. No elderly men. No wigs.

Why are you still thinking about elderly naked men in clown wigs? Weirdo.

And they call ME crazy.

The harder you try not to think about something, the more you'll think about it. So what do you do instead? Let the thoughts come. Don't fight them, don't judge yourself for having them, simply let the idea of murdering your family wash over you, and then finish ordering your caramel latte like it ain't no thing. If you can do this often enough, you'll stop thinking of the thoughts as threatening, and you won't feel nearly as anxious elderly when naked they man do clown come wig around.

See? You're still thinking about them, even when I jumble the words. Freak.

#2. Explaining It Normally Makes Conversations Weird

I usually don't have impulses about harming someone unless I'm very close to them, because OCD tends to attack you right where it'll hurt the most. But there's no ideal way to tell someone "I'm having an urge to plunge this steak knife into your throat because I love you." Only my parents and a couple of trusted friends know the full extent of what I've gone through.

I could tell you, but then I'd have to want to kill you.

Even if you want to talk about it, you have no idea how people will react. It doesn't help your sneaking suspicion that you're a crazy person when you can't tell anyone what you're going through because you would sound like the crazy person you fear you are. Seriously, OCD is some pro-caliber meta torture.

So you go to dinner parties and smile when the host talks about how OCD she is because she arranges her cutlery by size, all the while resisting the urge to tell her what it's really like, because you don't want to be forced to leave in shame and embarrassment, at least not before dessert is served. And every now and then, you build a relationship that's trusting and open enough for you to feel comfortable explaining what you're going through without fear of misconceptions or misunderstandings.

Being able to tell even a few people makes a world of difference. My parents and the few friends I have told have been immeasurably supportive and understanding, and that helps me trust myself and recover from setbacks. But it takes a long and sometimes lonely time to go from "Nice to meet you" to "Hey, you know that chainsaw in your garage? Funny story ..."

#1. OCD Will Never Go Away -- It Will Only Switch Tactics To Get at You Again

Some people with Pure OCD worry that they're pedophiles. I was one of them. After I started getting my violent thoughts under control, I got a job as a babysitter, and my brain immediately went, "Oh hey! Let's screw this all up!" So I started thinking about sexually assaulting this innocent little boy that I loved.

If you feel messed up reading that, imagine having to live it.

Additional therapy helped me deal with these new thoughts and keep my job, but my point is that you don't "cure" OCD -- you just develop coping mechanisms while it looks for new ways to screw with you. Usually, OCD strikes back during a big shift in my life -- leaving for college, moving, taking up my crimefighting mentor's identity after their death, etc. The stress of a changing situation makes it easier for OCD to sneak back like a deadbeat ex.

Again, it's not all pedophilia and murder -- you can obsess about anything. For a while, I couldn't fly because I was worried the plane would be hijacked. I couldn't go to movies because I would fixate on one person in the audience and believe that they were going to blow up the theater. I don't know why this fear was specific to theaters, but at least it gave me a good excuse for when my friends wanted to go see Adam Sandler movies.

For a few weeks, I couldn't sleep without worrying that I had been possessed. I would doubt that I was in control of my own movements, so I would lie perfectly still to convince myself that I was still in control of my body. Intellectually I knew this was ridiculous, but that's the magic of OCD -- you know what you're thinking is weird, but you think it anyway. I once read about a man who was obsessed with thoughts about his head being made of fruit, and while I can't help but giggle now, it probably wasn't a laughing matter to the guy who thought he was a delusional banana.

I don't want to paint an overly negative picture. I have an independent life and healthy personal relationships, I contribute to society, and I'm pursuing my dream of becoming a screenwriter. I do still have impulses to murder my loved ones, but the thoughts aren't nearly as scary, and they rarely make me curl into a ball of anxiety anymore. It's just something I have to deal with from time to time, like how other people might have to deal with a weird mole on their face that everyone pretends not to notice (but totally does). It was a long and painful road to get where I am today, but I finally reached an ending worthy of an inspirational '80s sports movie. But remember that no victory is complete. In reality, the kids in those films still go on to face serious challenges in later life.

Unless they all turn on each other and start stabbing in the post-credits scene.