

How to Deal With Obsessions and Compulsions

How to escape the prison of your mind and enjoy true inner freedom.

By

- Steven C. Hayes, Psychology Prof at the University of NV, and one of the most cited scholars worldwide on acceptance, mindfulness, & values.



When it comes to eccentric billionaires, there's no one like Howard Hughes. After he inherited his father's company at the early age of 18, Hughes went on to make himself a name as a movie maker, aviation pioneer, and business magnate. But even though his life was marked by fame and riches, Hughes was no stranger to hardship and pain.

Growing up, his mother frequently worried about her son catching a life-threatening illness. And after she had passed, Hughes continued the tradition, by growing an obsessive fear of germs. Normal everyday activities became increasingly dangerous and potentially life threatening.

In order to avoid being contaminated by germs, Hughes ordered his servants to wash themselves thoroughly, and to cover their hands with multiple layers of paper towels before they were allowed to serve his daily meals.

He wrote manuals for his staff, describing in detail how to open a can of peaches, which included washing the can multiple times, scrubbing it to the bare metal, and pouring its contents into a bowl without the bowl and the can touching each other.

Hughes reportedly spent his final days in darkened hotel rooms, lying naked in bed wearing nothing but tissue boxes on his feet to protect himself from germs. Despite his immeasurable wealth, Hughes died as a prisoner of his own mind.

Why Most People Are “Crazy”

It's easy to dismiss Howard Hughes as a lunatic billionaire who simply went mad. But underneath the eccentric lifestyle and elaborate cleaning rituals, was a man not too dissimilar from you or me.

The truth is, we frequently fall into the traps of our own mind. And even though only few people grow an obsession to the length of a Howard Hughes, we are all capable of having unwanted, disturbing thoughts.

For instance, when you are preparing dinner with friends and hold the kitchen knife, you might have a fleeting thought about how you could stab the person right next to you. Disturbed by your own thought, you gingerly put the knife away.

Or when you are standing near the edge of a train track, you might have a thought about what it would be like to jump in front of an oncoming train. As a result, just to be extra careful, you take a few steps back.

These intrusive thoughts come in all shapes and forms, and they often provoke feelings of shame, fear, and disgust. And while they can certainly be unsettling, they are also exceedingly normal.

When researcher Adam Radomsky and his colleagues assessed over 700 college students from 13 different countries, almost all of the students (94%) reported to have had an intrusive thought in the past three months.

This means either we are all crazy, or intrusive unwanted thoughts are part of the normal human condition. Personally, I think it's the latter.

Where the REAL Problem Begins

There is no harm in having unwanted, disturbing thoughts. The obsessive thoughts themselves are not the problem. The real problem, instead, only begins when we start taking our obsessive thoughts literally or treat them as if thoughts alone are harmful.

When we “fuse” with our obsessive thoughts, we start taking them as a directive, as something that we need to act upon and comply with. The resulting actions are called compulsions, and they are the ones that cause all the trouble.

For instance, there's no problem in thinking that germs will contaminate your body, as long as you can notice these thoughts from a defused standpoint. However, once you take these thoughts literally, and you take up to ten showers every day to avoid contamination, it begins to negatively affect your life.

Obsessions often have a superstitious component. And even though most people who struggle with OCD are aware that their thinking is largely flawed and irrational, they still feel pressured to act out their compulsions. Just to be safe.

For instance, a person might have a recurring thought about losing loved ones in a horrible car accident. As a result, she feels pressured to frequently check up on them to make sure they are safe, even though she “knows” failing to make a call will not cause an accident.

Acting out compulsions often feels good, because it provides momentary relief from the anxiety or dread the thoughts produce. The disaster has been averted, and nobody had to die. But while acting out compulsions prevents fictitious suffering, it often comes along with real life costs.

Some of the cost is immediate and practical. Compulsions can take a toll on your time, when you need to spend time each day repeatedly checking your locks and switches, and performing your compulsive rituals. They can take a toll on your health when you need to wash your hands dozens of times

each day before they are “really clean.” And compulsions can take a toll on your relationships when you frequently need to draw your loved ones into your compulsive behavior.

But the worst part is that these costs keep increasing. By treating frightening thoughts as something that must be avoided, we increase their fearsomeness. Our own actions give them status they do not deserve, and we get caught in a vicious circle that gradually eliminates our own peace of mind.

So even though compulsive actions provide momentary relief, they cause pain and suffering in the long term. If you wish to escape the cycle of obsessions and compulsions, you need to start setting and breaking the limitations of your own mind.

How To Deal With Obsessions and Compulsions

Step #1 Notice the Voice of the Dictator Within

An obsessive mind is eager to tell you what you should and should not do. It is like a Dictator living inside your head. It will urge you to act out your compulsions, and threaten you with intense feelings of anxiety in case you don't follow suit. As hard as it can be, it's crucial here for you to notice your mind's demands with a sense of distance, curiosity, and self-compassion.

This may mean for you to stop yourself in the middle of an obsessive thought. Or this may mean to stop yourself in the middle of an compulsive action. Then, instead of complying, notice the voice the way you might notice a bossy four year old.

This is often easier said than done, and there's no one formula that fits all. Depending on your circumstances, and personal history with obsessions and compulsions, you may need a different approach.

When you catch yourself having an obsessive thought, you might want to defuse from this thoughts by saying “*I notice I'm having the thought that (insert your obsessive thought)*”. As you do this, you might notice how this creates some space between you and the thought, making the thought lose some of its punch.

There's a whole range of defusion techniques, and you might want to experiment with different defusion techniques to find out which works best for you.

When you catch yourself in the middle of a compulsive action, you may want to pause for a second, and allow yourself to feel the tension, uneasiness, and anxiety that show up when you're not completing the compulsion. This means letting go of the urge to act, and meeting your uncomfortable feelings with an attitude of self-kindness and open curiosity.

The first step to dealing with obsessions and compulsions is to not do as your Dictator Within tells you, but instead to stop, step back, and notice the bossy voice as something you have, not something you are.

Step #2 Carry Out Your Own Declaration of Independence

After you have stopped yourself from giving in to your mind's demands, and you've assumed a more open and kind posture toward your thoughts, it's time to flip the script. It's time to declare independence.

Again, the concrete action steps are different each time, depending on your immediate circumstances, and personal history with obsessions and compulsions.

For some compulsions it might mean doing literally nothing, since the opposite of repeatedly checking locks and switches is to not check mentioned locks and switches. For other compulsions, however, there's a clear line of what you are not supposed to do. For instance, when your mind tells you that you need to wash yourself, it's time to rub your fingers in some dirt.

It's best if the alternative course of action is actually something useful or values based. For example, a patient of mine noticed his mind told him his kids were too germey to be touched, so he played with them instead.

I personally used to have obsessive thoughts about my hands being dirty and needing to wash them. When I noticed I was starting to wash my hands as a form of avoidance, I came up with this plan:

Whenever my mind demanded I "wash my hands or else", even though they did not appear dirty, I smiled and sucked my fingers instead. Boy did my mind scream about that one! But it wasn't a matter of days, before my obsessive urges started to become hesitant ("uh, wash your... no, no. I don't mean it!").

Don't turn this "opposite game" into a new compulsion. The goal is having the independent right to live a full life, regardless of what the Dictator Within declares.

The second step is to explore the limitations of your own mind, and to do behave freely and independently. Start by breaking the rules and do what your mind tells you not to.

In Conclusion

We are all capable of having unwanted, obsessive thoughts. But regardless how disturbing a thought can be, a thought is just a thought, with no power to harm you or anyone else.

Obsessions only become problematic when they enter the realm of actions, either private acts to undo them or public acts to placate them. Once we start taking our thoughts literally, and act on them compulsively, they start to negatively affect our lives. It is then, that obsessions begin to take a toll on our time, health, and relationships and to extract a higher and higher cost over time.

If we wish to overcome our obsessions and compulsions, we need to learn how to stop ourselves mid-flight. We may need to defuse from obsessive thoughts, making the thoughts lose their punch by creating some distance between us and the thought.

Or we may need to learn how to make room for the uncomfortable feelings that inevitably show up whenever we resist the urge to act out our compulsions. And when our mind presents us with self-imposed rules of what we can and cannot do, it's time go against the grain and behave independently, starting with exactly what our mind is so afraid of.

The more we break the self-set limitations of our own mind, the more we break free from our mental prison, and can finally enjoy a newfound freedom. It is the type of freedom not even billions can buy.

— Published on May 8, 2019