

Dear fellow OCD sufferer.

I hope this finds you well and your OCD isn't giving you too much of a hard time. Believe me, I know how bad things can get. I've decided to write an open letter about my OCD journey, because just over a year ago I was in an impossible situation where I'd have benefited greatly from reading a positive story. There's plenty of amazing books out there guiding sufferers through the painful recovery process, but you don't hear from the people that have been helped too often. So, here's my story.

Last year I reached a point where my OCD had utterly destroyed me. I'd been a sufferer for 10 years. In that time, I'd been under two different Community Mental Health Teams, seen 3 accredited Cognitive Behavioural Therapists and tried three different SSRIs. None of them had helped me significantly. In hindsight I now realise they all lacked knowledge of how to effectively treat OCD, which is sadly all too common in general mental health treatment. The best I'd been able to achieve was a period of stability involving my usual subtle avoidance measures, followed inevitably by a triggering episode and then a full-blown relapse – that was the cycle for pretty much 10 years. Last year's relapse was the worst so far. I had to stop working again and my girlfriend abandoned me. For the first time, I was thinking very seriously about suicide. I'd thought about it before, but this was the first time it seemed like a viable option to end the pain I was going through.

I was under my local CMHT at the time. I had had my medication played around with and I was on an open-ended waiting list for 'psychology'. I was getting nowhere. I visited my GP – who had a special interest in mental health and had actually diagnosed me in the first place 10 years ago – and said I was utterly desperate. She told me about a specialist treatment centre in London for anxiety disorders which she had referred a patient to some years before. She asked if I would like to be referred there, to see if I would meet their criteria for treatment. "Ok," I said, not really holding out much hope either way. A month later I was anxiously on my way to London for my first assessment. It was largely a box ticking exercise to see if I would meet their criteria for treatment. Sure enough, with my previous failed trials of CBT and medication, I did.

A few months passed and I was again sat in the waiting room, this time ready for my first appointment with my appointed therapist. It was horrible. I went through everything I'd been through in my 10 years of being an OCD sufferer. My fears. My beliefs about myself. My most horrible episodes. What my previous treatments had been like. What had worked and what hadn't. At the end of the session, my new therapist told me that I could get to a better place where OCD no longer ruled my life, but that to get to that better place I'd need to be prepared to go to places I don't want to go. Places that I'd been avoiding for so long. I'd have to confront those OCD beliefs about myself head on – and it would be painful. The next week we began by outlining the program of treatment ahead. It was a rising scale of exposures exercises to, in her words, readdress the scales of evidence that fuel my OCD beliefs (the clinical term for this kind of therapy is Exposure with Response Prevention or ERP for short). It was everything I'd failed to do in the previous attempts at therapy. Tasks that seemed absolutely impossible to me. And in some cases outright dangerous. But at that point something inside me suddenly clicked. At the end of that session I made a decision - I had to do this. Even if I absolutely didn't want to. Even if every OCD warning signal in my brain screamed stop. I would have to complete the course. I'd lost too much to OCD. I couldn't let it take any more. Bugger it, I said to myself - let's go.

And now it's 7 months later and I completed my final session of therapy a few months ago. I have spent most of that time doing exposures exercises which - I'll be honest - I'm not too comfortable sharing with the general public, but nonetheless exposures that I needed to do. Sometimes with my therapist, most of the time without. I went into it full steam ahead and I didn't stop. I kept

pping the ante of exposure along that rising scale we had drawn up together. At several points I wondered if it was working - I was very tempted to give up. Was I getting anywhere? But with my amazing therapist's guidance, I kept on going. Marching on with a mentality which my therapist jokingly called the 'Special Forces Training' mindset (from one of the OCD textbooks, I believe).

So how am I now? Well, for the first time in 10 years I feel something different inside myself. That niggling doubt in the back of my mind that started that damned OCD cycle over and over for 10 years - it isn't there. I am now able to do things which would have absolutely triggered me into an OCD episode last year. In fact, I've just done one of those things. I feel fine. Did I get intrusive thoughts doing it? Yes. Did they bother me? Not nearly so much. In fact, I will comfortably say I am now able to do what non-OCD sufferers do - dismiss them. I don't want this to read like "OMG my OCD is cured!" Make no mistake - I still get intrusive thoughts. In fact, they haven't changed in content (just significantly quieter and less repetitive). But what has definitely changed is my reaction to them. Now they simply come and go.

Now, I'm not stupid. I know that OCD will challenge me again down the line. Of course it will. But after completing months of exposure exercises, I feel equipped with knowledge about myself that I didn't have before, that I am certain will inform how I react in the future. I feel equipped with a new mental toolkit. A powerful one. It's hard to articulate what I mean by an acquired 'knowledge' in fighting OCD. It's power, basically. It gives you the power to dismiss those dreaded intrusive thoughts as meaningless.

I'll explain:

As a sufferer, you spend your whole time filling up a box of 'evidence' at one end of a scale, with OCD beliefs about yourself or things. Each time you avoid a thing/situation, you keep adding to it. You develop a 'Theory A' of the situation. In embarking on the exposure work, you seek to fill up a box of 'evidence' at the other end of the scale - a 'Theory B'. You have probably read about the Theory A/Theory B approach in the textbooks or had a therapist explain it, but it's central to your recovery. In embarking on prolonged exposure work (you absolutely cannot do this by halves, you need to go in with everything you've got) and with time, that Theory B becomes the 'knowledge' you have to dismiss intrusive thoughts. And further along the road, they get quieter and you can go about your life without the OCD woodpecker burrowing into your mind!

I'm not saying I'm bulletproof from the psychological torment that intrusive thoughts inflict. That new Theory B I now live by might get challenged by OCD again. It probably will. I might have to readdress those scales again with more exposure work. But now I feel that I have power and knowledge to fight it. That is recovery.

I have been so lucky to work with an amazing therapist; I am not oblivious to that fact. Without her guidance, I couldn't have done it. I realise some people won't be so fortunate but hear this - last year I was suicidal. I'd tried and failed to beat OCD for 10 years. I believed I was basically untreatable and there was no hope. In completing my therapy I have come to accept that you can't cure OCD - the intrusive thoughts won't go away - but you CAN absolutely dissolve their power with effective Cognitive Behavioural Therapy involving an intense focus on Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP). You can build up a knowledge of how OCD has been lying to you and master exactly how to dismiss them. You CAN absolutely be free of the trauma and devastation OCD causes.

To achieve this, you need to:

1. Have guidance from someone who knows OCD. Not a chat, actual affirmative guidance. They need to tell you how it works and exactly what you need to do to beat it very early on.
2. Go guns blazing into the exposure work. I mean months of it. It's a marathon, not a sprint.
3. Have positivity and BRAVERY. You are going into battle. It's a long military campaign. You will question yourself; you will be tempted to give up. KEEP GOING. Eventually you will develop the 'knowledge' to take OCD's power away.

Also: medication might be useful in support, but it won't fix OCD. Only ERP can. The same with complimentary therapies like mindfulness - they can assist, but to treat OCD you need to run the exposure marathon!

So, to finish - I'm not 'cured' from OCD, I still get Intrusive thoughts, but after 7 months of DAILY and HOURLY exposure work under guidance from an amazing therapist I am now able to live a life free of the constant agonising doubt that a bombardment of intrusive thoughts inflicts.

For the first time in 10 years, I am at peace and am not avoiding anything. I really mean that.

If you're about to begin exposure work, good luck and look forward to getting to the other side of this. ERP works.

The OCD Beard

<https://twitter.com/TheOCDBeard>