

Exposure Therapy

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During both my schizoaffective disorder episodes I had many obsessive behaviors that were detrimental to my health. One of them was obsessively cleaning everything and anything I owned as well as I possibly could repeatedly. I once emptied my room and cleaned every single thing I owned top to bottom including the room. I scrubbed the ceilings, walls, windows, and hired a carpet cleaner to professionally clean the carpet twice. I cleaned my hands so repetitively and thoroughly that they had tons of little cuts on them and looked as though I had run them through buckets of glass shards. I had become a germaphobe because I believed I was a messiah and thought external purity created internal purity and if I was to save the world I needed to be pure.

Immediately after my second episode I was still a germaphobe. Overcoming my abnormal fear of germs took mental flexibility which I worked on with my doctor in talk therapy. We searched for reasons I had an abnormal fear and I eventually disclosed how I thought I would become a messiah if I did everything correctly and was a pure person. A couple years after I stopped obsessively hand washing, I uncovered the deeper reasons for the hand washing which came down to wanting more control over my life. Being in a schizoaffective disorder episode is very disorienting and precarious and I felt if I had control over my material possessions and they were clean then my mind would be cleaner and I would be able to think more clearly and have more control.

It took time to face the fears that generated the hand washing and even after I determined the reasons, I was excessively washing; I was still afraid to refrain from doing so. This occurred because I had difficulty trusting anyone other than myself unless I could see the logic they were presenting me with. In this case and many others, I understood the surface logic but wouldn't listen because I had emotional connections and irrational subconscious fears connected to my obsessive habits. Another facet that comes into play is understanding the deeper logic within my psyche. At that time I wasn't able to delve deep enough into my mind to understand the way I was thinking while obsessive compulsions were occurring. Having this current ability has helped me overcome many issues.

Although I didn't know the deepest reasons I obsessively washed, having some basic logic to understand my habit helped me move towards exposing myself to not washing my hands. Many times when I've had an irrational fear, I've found dozens of questions or doubts opposing a change of habit and have had to answer those questions and refute those doubts before having the courage to face and eliminate the fear while in breaking compulsive habits or trying a new way of doing things. While facing the compulsive hand washing I worried, "Is not washing my hands and then coming in contact with others disrespectful?" and "Will my health diminish if I don't wash my hands as thoroughly and frequently as I have been?" Talk therapy and journaling have been extremely helpful in eliminating questions and doubts of this nature. While in my earlier stages of recovery, I almost always needed talk therapy and the guide of my doctor to help refute these questions, but as my mental health and intelligence have improved I've been able to more frequently eliminate these questions by journaling. When I have been able to better understand the reasons I have been afraid of an experience it has given me courage to face my fear. At this point my hands were cut and in pain and I knew I wasn't a messiah anymore but still washed them.

My doctor recommended exposure therapy where I exposed myself to not washing them and dealt with the emotions of the experience first hand. My anxiety was extremely high after the first couple times of not washing my hands excessively. I had compulsions to return to washing them but kept disciplined and avoided it. Seeing an example of where I previously overcame the fear I had in the context of my own life was extremely helpful. It's important that it was in the context of my own life because I had empirical knowledge to corroborate the ideas my doctor was impressing upon me and this first hand experience could not be refuted by any questions I could pose in my own life. It simply held true and as I exposed myself more to my fear more I felt increasingly safer.

Although I knew I was all right after refraining from excessive washing there was always a nagging urge to go back and wash because I still felt anxiety but I fought it. I had times where not washing my hands excessively felt terrifying but realized the anxiety was coming from other

issues in my life and not from the thought of refraining from washing them. This idea helped me completely dismiss my delusion and also speaks volumes to the number of issues people with mental illness constantly face from having experienced episodes. After realizing the anxiety was from other issues, the excessive hand washing and any urge to excessively wash was completely eliminated. Adverse emotions have hovered around obsessive behaviors from episodes simply because they have reminded me of the episode but that has dissipated over time as the meaning surrounding behaviors has changed for me.

As I moved away from my episode and became healthier, I still wanted clean hands but also had a more rational mind. I decided for some instances I would just use water and for others I would use soap and water. I realized when it comes to obsessive behaviors I have to simply identify what the purpose of the behavior is and fulfill that purpose and once fulfilled, I have to move on to a different task. I now understand I am not a messiah and don't need to purify myself at all but have put

a safeguard in place against the obsessive cleaning. I've told myself a certain amount of dirt has to remain on the earth from time to time so we don't exhaust our natural resources while excessively cleaning everything. I currently understand I can miss a hand washing with no negative repercussions and am fairly certain the world isn't going to run out of resources because of cleaning but I know I think differently during episodes. I don't think OCD will ever be a problem for me again but I've put safeguards of this nature in place in case of another episode.

When I'm facing new fears and am preparing to be exposed to them; I remember the times when I was previously exposed to the thing or experience I am afraid of that rendered no negative repercussions or had a positive outcome. Doing this has given me the courage to face those fears and undergo exposure therapy. Sometimes these positive memories have completely eliminated the fear altogether and I've been void of anxiety or any negative emotions while facing the experience I was afraid of.