OCD: Feelings of Threat (A lot!)

- **INCOMING!** Obsessions can intrude anytime, anywhere, and take any form. You may feel like you’re constantly weaving and bobbing from incoming threats.

- **THREAT!** Obsessions trigger the flight/flight response—a feeling of life or death. Your brain kicks into threat mode.

- **VIGILANCE!** It feels like danger can lurk anywhere. You might feel almost constantly vigilant for threat.

  It’s hard to shift your attention anywhere else when you feel almost constantly threatened by OCD.
OCD and Seeking Relief Can Become Your Focus of Attention

• OCD may take up large chunks of your time and attention on a daily basis

• Obsessions may distract you and take you out of your present moments

• Obsessions may cause you to focus inwardly much of the time when they scare you and lead you to seek relief by engaging in compulsions (both outward compulsions and mental compulsions)

• You may find yourself missing out on a lot of your life and the lives of those around you

OCD may leave you internally focused and distracted much of the time
OCD: Feelings of Isolation and Shame

• Many people in your life may not understand OCD

• Even if they do, they often can’t comprehend how badly you feel and how much you struggle every day

• Your obsessions and compulsions may feel like they are “one of a kind”

• You may feel embarrassed and ashamed about the content of your obsessions or about engaging in compulsions
OCD: Feelings of Anger, Frustration, and Self-Criticism

• Angry that you have to deal with OCD

• Angry and frustrated when challenging OCD: It can seem like an endless struggle and you may not always feel successful

• Frustrated, self-critical, and down on yourself

• Angry with others who accidently trigger your OCD or who get frustrated with you for not making “enough” progress

• Angry, frustrated, and critical with yourself for not making “enough” progress
Treatment for OCD

• ERP is the gold standard for treatment
• Leaning-in to uncertainty and what underlies the content of your fears rather than avoiding or using compulsions for immediate relief is hard work!
• This treatment takes lots of practice: intentional and unexpected
• New obsessions may intrude and old ones may resurface
• It is life-long work!

You may feel exhausted and discouraged along the way
What Can Help?

- Good treatment providers, the best level of care, and supports

- Defining your greater life values: Why do this hard work? Integrating your life values and greater good reasons for making hard choices along the way

- Mindfulness practice

- Self-compassion practice
  - Mindfulness
  - Self-kindness
  - Common humanity
Compassion and the Brain: Gilbert, CFT

Systems of emotion and motivation

• Threat and self-protection system

• Drive system

• Safeness and soothing system
Self-Compassion

The Three Elements of Self-Compassion

• Self-Kindness

• Common Humanity

• Mindfulness
How Self-Compassion Can Help When Challenging OCD

- Activate the soothing system and be able to engage with aversive inner experiences and emotions
- Develop increased mindfulness and expand your focus of attention, both internally and externally
- Decrease sense of being alone in suffering
- Decrease sense of shame for your suffering
- Decrease self-criticism
- Increase self-kindness
- Increase compassion for others
Using Self-Compassion with OCD and ERP

• Self-compassion to soothe

• Self-compassion to build courage and motivation
Individual Tx Integrating Self-Compassion

Examples
Observation: OCD can sometimes “Hijack” Awareness and Compassion for Others

Examples
Observation: OCD can “Hijack” Awareness and Compassion for Others

When discussing “Life after Treatment,” Mary Samson writes:

“In fact, one of the best side effects of treatment has been a growing sense of compassion for others. Instead of being grossed out or spinning out obsessing about people who trigger me, I look at them as human beings—human just like me—who may have all kinds of OCD of their own, for all I know!”

Mary Samson in Davidson, (2014). Daring to Challenge OCD
Observation: OCD can “Hijack” Awareness and Compassion for Others

- Initial mindful self-compassion exercises often compare how you talk to a friend with how you talk to yourself, yet this can be challenging when you’re coping with constant threats/challenges. It can be difficult to think of kind words of encouragement when you are in the grip of battling with OCD yourself.

- Finding compassion for others may be a useful initial step.
OCD Mindfulness-Based Self-Compassion
10-Week Group: Observations

• Initial sessions were difficult for some due to individual manifestations of OCD being activated in a group setting and during initial exercises, making it hard to be present and around other group members

• The internal focus of encountering OCD triggers and coping with urges to engage in compulsions or avoidance seemed paramount. Some questioned leaving the group because it was too activating
OCD Mindfulness-Based Self-Compassion
10-Week Group: Observations

• Over time, compassion for each other and others’ OCD struggles was most palpable in the room. Some stayed after group to connect, share, offer and receive advice and support. All offered kindness to each other. Some continue to stay in touch and help each other.

• For my own clients and former client, I observed that compassion for others in the group seemed to pave the way for practicing self-compassion. Impasses in treatment were being overcome and treatment was moving forward.
OCD Mindfulness-Based Self-Compassion
10-Week Group: Observations

• Group members were learning and practicing mindfulness
• Common humanity awareness seemed to develop over time as part of the group process and development
• Members with more familiarity using self-compassion exercises engaged in them more easily. Members were beginning to practice some of the exercises outside of group.
• With increased awareness of and compassion for others in the group, some members seemed more able to shift to experimenting with self-compassion
Thoughts for Future Groups

• More than 10-sessions could be beneficial

• Initial sessions can focus more on getting to know each other and sharing feelings about and experiences with being in a group with others who have OCD

• Be more explicit about observations of common humanity (within the group!)

• Begin with shorter and more guided mindfulness exercises

• Integrate exercises with immediate de-briefing and discussions that include how to respond if OCD was activated and how to use the exercises, if helpful, during the week

• Be more explicit about how the exercises are playing or can play a role in OCD treatment

• Help members individualize their plans moving forward each week
References


Thank you!

Joan Davidson, Ph.D.
Co-Director, San Francisco Bay Area Center for Cognitive Therapy
jd@sfbacct.com
www.sfbacct.com