

## 2. Are We All OC or What?

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It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize, out of a number of facts, which are incidental and which vital. Otherwise your energy and attention must be dissipated instead of being concentrated.<sup>1</sup>

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is said to be the *fourth* most common mental disorder. I leave you to guess what the first three are.

The prevalence of OCD in the general population – that is, how many people have met diagnostic criteria for OCD within a certain year – is consistently found to be 1-3%.(Kiejna, Rymaszewska, Kantorska-Janiec, & Tokarski, 2002) (Ruscio, Stein, Chiu, & Kessler, 2010) (Fineberg et al., 2013) (M A Fullana et al., 2010) (Miguel A. Fullana et al., 2009)

Numbers for the obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPDO) are less reliable, and the prevalence is said to range from 3 to 8% of the general population.(Grant, Mooney, & Kushner, 2012) (Oltmanns, Rodrigues, Weinstein, & Gleason, 2014) (Diedrich & Voderholzer, 2015) The eight per cent figure means that one person in twelve is a rigid control-freak. I wouldn't believe that on my most cynical day. One out of 33 is more like it but maybe I'm too kind.

The prevalence of OC symptoms or traits is hard to gauge, because there aren't strict rules for defining an OC symptom (as opposed to "normal" obsessions or compulsions) or "normal" OC traits, like conscientiousness, piety or orderliness. When one surveys individuals in the general population who have never had a psychiatric disorder, the numbers with OC symptoms or traits ranges from 13% in New Zealand to 72% in Israel.(Miguel A. Fullana et al., 2009) (Apter et al., 1996) A range of 13% to 72% is virtually meaningless. The best studies suggest a that the proportion of the general population with OC symptoms or traits is one in three or four, so I use 30% during the relevant discussions.

Obsessive-compulsive experiences are said to occur in 90% of all people at one point of another in their lives.(Pallanti, 2008) This striking statistic originated with two English psychologists, Stanley Rachman and Padma de Silva who reported that 90% of perfectly normal people experience obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviors. Their observation has been replicated several times, although the numbers were later revised downward (to 80%). "Normal" obsessions and compulsions are said to be harmless intrusions that cause no distress or interference with one's everyday life, but they are not different in kind from the obsessions and compulsions experienced by patients with OCD or OCPDO.(Rachman & de Silva, 1978) Nevertheless, 31%–42% of *people with no mental disorder* report having been bothered by obsessions for periods of over 2 weeks, 25% reported experiencing obsessions for more than an hour a day, and approximately 15% reported being emotionally upset by them. With respect to compulsions, 33%–45% reported performing them for periods of over 2 weeks; 11%–12% of healthy individuals reported being upset by having to perform such rituals, "but only one study member reported spending more than one hour a day performing rituals."(Miguel A. Fullana et al., 2009)

Why in the world didn't that fellow get help? And he had *no mental disorder!*? Can you imagine spending *more* than an hour a day performing meaningless rituals? As it happens, only a minority of individuals who experience obsessions and/or compulsions seek help for their symptoms and those who do are usually diagnosed with anxiety or depression or ADD.

The most common OC symptoms, in patients and normal OC's are *harm/checking*, like checking locks, stoves and other appliances or worrying that one might harm other people by not performing a certain ritual; hoarding (4% of the so-called normal population!); symmetry/ordering (*If I do this with my right hand I have to do it with my left hand, too*); shameful thoughts and somatic obsessions. Males are more prone to sexual and religious obsessions

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<sup>1</sup> The Reigate Squire

and they are likelier to have tics or problems with compulsive substance abuse. Women are more prone to contamination/cleaning obsessions, eating disorders and impulse-control problems (binge-eaters, shopaholics).

Among dogs, licking is the commonest compulsion although bull terriers are prone to compulsive spinning. Cats are given to compulsive grooming and repetitive vocalizations or *meowing*.

The way psychiatrists discover how many people have a mental disorder is not high-tech. The trick is to survey a large number of people – usually a few thousand – who are representative of a larger population. The sample should reflect the demographic characteristics of the residents of a city, county, state or country, at least with respect to age, sex and race but ideally also ethnic background, education level and social-economic status. The ideal is seldom achieved, which is why epidemiological surveys usually generate different prevalence statistics. The real prevalence can only be estimated as a range, combining the results of many studies. There have been a lot of OCD surveys, so the 1-3% estimate is probably sound. There haven't been many studies of the OCPDO, so the 3-8% range is not very reliable.

Surveying a sample involves questioning individuals and that can be done in various ways, using different "instruments." Those are usually questionnaires of one sort or another, which have the advantage of brevity. The Yale-Brown Obsessive-Compulsive Scale (Y-BOCS) is the most commonly used "instrument" in OCD studies. The ideal method for a survey is a "semi-structured interview," which involves a discussion between the subject and a highly trained interviewer and takes an hour or two to administer. Studies using such interviews are very expensive, especially if one is trying to accumulate 2,000 subjects. The Y-BOCS is more economical and addresses the most important points.

The Y-BOCS is a checklist of the "hard signs" of OCD. It's not a diagnostic instrument. Even if you have or have had a lot of the 86 obsessions and compulsions listed on the scale, it doesn't mean you're OCD. OCD is a clinical diagnosis based on the severity of the patient's symptoms and the degree to which they interfere with his or her normal life. But the hard signs are a clue to how OC you may be.

Many of the patients who I thought were OC didn't have many of the "hard signs" of OCD, or at least they wouldn't own up. They are more likely to have "soft signs." It's possible that the soft signs of OC may just indicate a soft-headed psychiatrist. A critical reader might say they are only *just the way some people are*. That, of course, is the point.

## THE SOFT SIGNS OF OC

**Eating.** Are you a fussy eater? If you are, what are you fussy about? Do you eat one thing at a time, first the peas, then the potatoes, then the meat? Or first the kale, then the quinoa and then the tofu? Does it bother you if your food touches on the plate? Do you eat in a circular pattern around the periphery of your plate? Does it drive you mad if your girlfriend takes a bit of food from your plate?

**Counting.** What is your favorite number? How many steps are there on the stairs in your house? Do you count things? Do you like to add, like the numbers on license plates you pass? Do you keep the volume-control knob on a odd or an even number? (The right answer is, an even number.)

**Fidgeting.** Everyone fidgets sometimes, but some of us do it in particular ways and not just when they're bored, nervous or impatient. When you walk down a hall, do you find yourself flicking your fingertips against the wall? Do you touch your thumb to your fingertips in succession, back and forth, back and forth? Do you twist your fingers in particular ways or touch your face a lot?

**Tics.** Tics are nervous mannerisms, little movements especially of the face or hands that happen quickly and repetitively, like shaking one's head to flip one's hair away from one's eyes or squinting one's eyes or twitching one's mouth. OCs will deny they fidget or tic and as you talk to them they will twitch or fidget away.

**Collecting and hoarding.** Do you like to collect things? (If so, what? Every little boy likes to collect rocks. Rocks don't count. I had a famous river rock the size of a cantaloupe I carried with me from Nova Scotia to New York to Montreal to Mississippi to North Carolina. F took it to her restaurant for a flower arrangement

and I haven't seen it since.) It's not fair to say that every collector is an OC, but some, like the Banana-man, qualify as such. OC's are notorious for never throwing anything away. Or then they get into a snit and throw *everything* away.

**Sensory aberrations.** Misophonia is the hatred of certain minor sounds, like the sound of someone chewing or someone tapping his foot or cracking his knuckles. Some people are extremely sensitive to the texture of certain foods. Some can't stand the way certain fabrics feel against their bodies, or how the constriction of a belt or an elastic waist feels, or how the label of a T-shirt feels against the back of their neck. Have you ever met anyone whose apartment and furnishings were all done in monochrome? Or white and black? Is that weird, or what?

**Dress.** You've probably known people who wear the same, identical clothing every day, like a hoodie or a black T-shirt and black jeans. What is it about wearing hoodies or black clothes? Some kids refuse to get rid of a timeworn hat or shoes and cultivate an appearance that is utterly *dérangé*. Kids are famous for normal obsessions and compulsions.

Some OC's, especially men, are fastidious in their dress. Bow-ties are a good sign of OC or poor taste or both.

**Sport.** I have never met a body-builder or a bicyclist who wasn't OC. Golf will *make* you an OC if you aren't one to begin with. Joggers aren't necessarily OC, but triathletes and marathoners – they do carry it a bit far don't you think?

**Occupation.** It's a truism that accountants, engineers, IT guys, scientists and medical professionals are OCs but it's not always true. It's true, however, more often than it's not true.

**Moralism.** There are saints among us who live out their moral beliefs through devotion and self-sacrifice. There are others whose impeccable moral standards are expressed from an armchair or at dinner. The tribe of moralistic OCs have strong opinions about...

**Politics,** where their impeccable moral standards can be applied to adjudge political figures from the unfavored party but conveniently set aside in behalf of their favored one. OCs have a hyperactive error detector but it tends to be unidirectional. Their opinions are not just opinions but expressions of the Moral Law.

Intolerance of fools and conspiracy theories occur as frequently on the left side of the political spectrum as they do on the right. Politics may be important but it isn't worth brooding over.

**Rumination.** Like ruminants, OCs will brood over a slight or transgression, an error or a mistake. Most OCs are light-hearted and resilient, but a particular event might just stick in their craw all day.

**Science,** which is a *good thing* because it disproves the existence of God, the uniqueness of humankind or the importance of values. It is a *bad thing* when it does something useful, like inventing crops that don't need pesticides or vaccines to prevent devastating childhood illnesses.

**Technology.** Techies as a group are OC, but certain technological developments have attracted OCs more than others. At one time, it was Hi-Fi. IT has sucked them all up now. For some reason, though, some venerable technologies, especially the dishwasher, are the focus of most of the OC anomalies that degrade the tranquility of an average household. I cannot explain why loading the dishwasher is the occasion of so many domestic quarrels.

Videogames are decidedly high-tech and a gamer today has a computer a thousand times more powerful than the one that sent Apollo to the moon. Board games may seem archaic to some gamers, but the innumerable descendants of Dungeons and Dragons appeal to OCs and to SAs.

One would have expected archaic technologies like mechanical wrist-watches and fountain pens to have fallen into the dustbin of history, and they would have, if not for the OCs. Who happen to be especially prone to...

**Suggestion.** Have you ever wondered how much of the price one pays for a Swiss wristwatch or an elegant fountain-pen is devoted to advertising in glossy publications that cater to the rich? The purveyors of

such objects must know (1) how many OCs there are out there and (2) how suggestible they are. *Here is a perfect machine you can possess and you can even wear on your wrist!* What would Thoreau say?

One can have enlightened discussions with such types about the relative merits of wrist-watches or fountain pens, or about the best way to load a dishwasher. One can also appreciate the intense thoughtfulness and rationality they bring to the most trivial issues. Analytical minds never stop. Especially when it's about themselves, because OCs are given to

**Self absorption.** OCs tend to take themselves too seriously and they are given to obsessive self-monitoring. The state of their health, the exercises they must pursue, the supplements they take and the quality of their diet are subject to constant scrutiny. They are also likely to be absorbed with their state of mind, which is why so many of them decide that they are ADD.

When an OC discovers a new interest he pursues it with intensity, and **intensity** is one of the cardinal features of an OC. It's not what one does that qualifies an OC but how he or she does it. Some people collect expensive wristwatches or are obsessed with having the right labels inside their clothes because they don't know better. Not everyone who is driven, impatient, hostile or ambitious is an OC, either. Just most of them.