

Health & Wellness

ICE HOUSE INTERVIEW

Ritual Killing: How to Beat OCD

Once told her OCD was too severe for treatment, Elizabeth McIngvale now works to help others overcome their own conditions.

By [Catherine Matusow](#) • 1/4/2015 at 11:59pm • Published in the [January 2015](#) issue of *Houstonia*





Elizabeth McIngvale overcame severe OCD. Now she and her family are working to help others suffering from the condition.

IMAGE: [MAX BURKHALTER](#)

ELIZABETH MCINGVALE DOUBTS whether 42 was the right number for her young self to obsess over. Actually, she doubts whether *any* number was the right one to obsess over, but particularly that one. Why? Well, 4 plus 2 equals 6, which is similar to 666, which is often associated with the Devil. But she had no choice—her mom was 42. And so, before she could get out of bed each morning, she had to sit up and down 42 times; she had to move her foot back and forth 42 times before taking a step; when washing her hands, she had to turn the faucet on 42 times, pump the soap 42 times, rinse her hands 42 times.

“Then I said, ‘Oh, that’s one set, so I should do 42 sets of 42,’” McIngvale recalls. She tells us this at the West Alabama Ice House, recounting her years of struggles in her self-assured, direct manner: how it took her an hour just to make it from the bedroom to the bathroom, the hours she spent washing her hands, which were raw, chapped, and bloody; the lies McIngvale told her mom about being allergic to the soap. Such rituals were difficult to hide, of course, not to mention embarrassing, but she couldn’t stop. The disease told her that they were important, that her family wouldn’t be safe otherwise.

McIngvale’s obsessive-compulsive disorder is in check now. The 27-year-old has completed a PhD in social work, graduating from UH last May, and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the VA Medical Center. She credits her recovery to two stints at the Menninger Clinic when she was a teen, although her path was far from short. When she was in eighth grade, her family, having noticed something was wrong the previous year, took her to therapist after therapist, only to be told that her OCD was too severe for treatment. Part of McIngvale’s problem was the shape-shifting nature of the illness. One week, it would manifest itself as an obsession with colors, numbers, symmetry, or order; another, with scrupulosity or hyper-responsibility. “Every time I would see the therapist I had new things,” she says. “Sometimes the old things were still there, sometimes not.”

It was her dad Jim McIngvale—Mattress Mack—who first heard about Menninger, by which time his daughter had left school and was living at a friend’s house. (One by one, the rooms in her parents’ home had become “contaminated,” she says.) On the day she left there were tears, there was drama, there was an attempt to bolt down the street (luckily an ex-Navy Seal was on hand to give chase).

After a three-month stay at the clinic, McIngvale was just as emotional as the day she arrived, this time because she was leaving. “I had learned to manage my illness,” she says, through a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy and exposure-and-response therapy, in which she faced her fears over and over and over without resorting to her rituals, doing so until her fears diminished and relief set in.

“

There was this part of me that hated the fact that I only got the care I deserved because my parents could afford it.

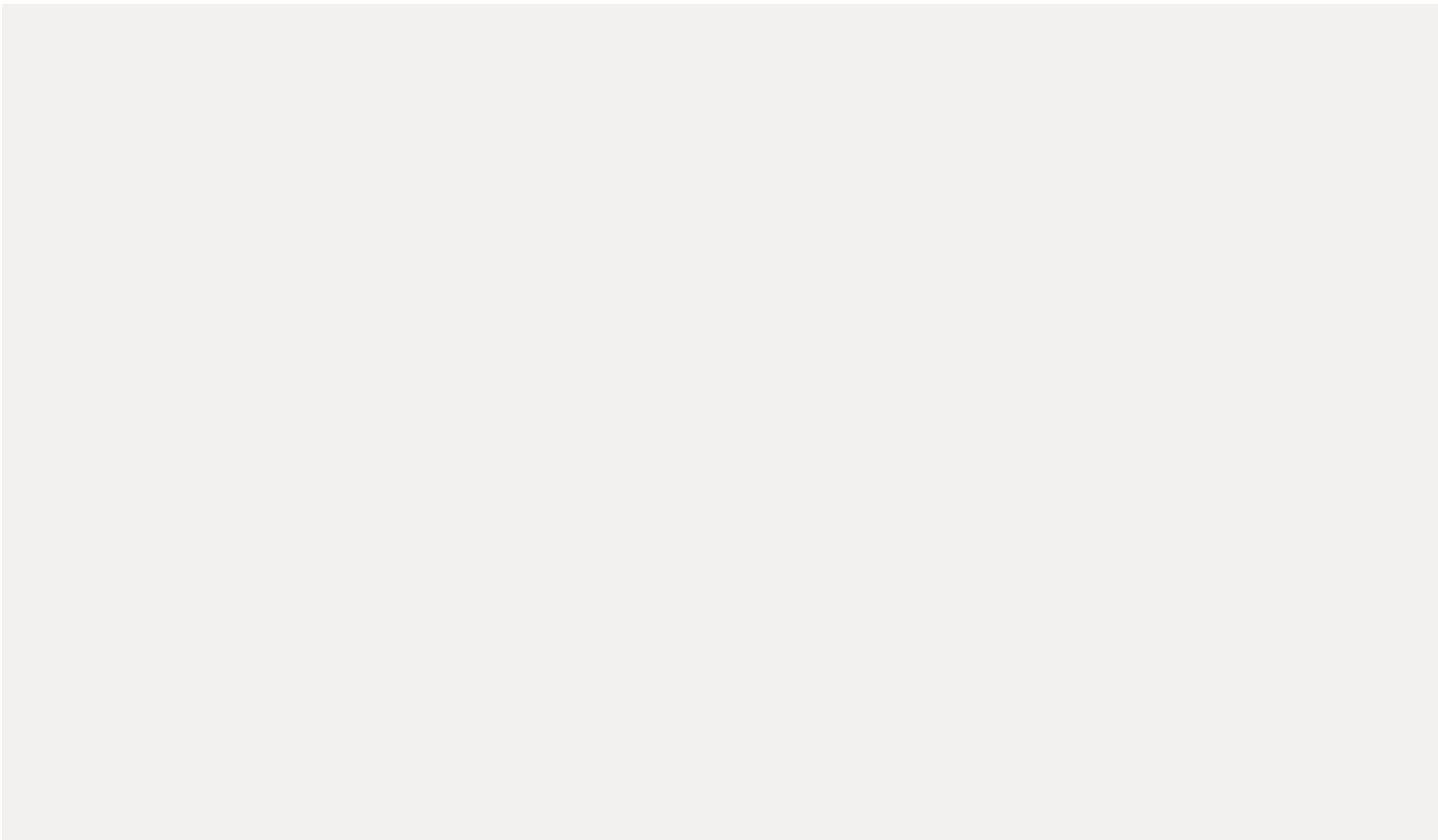
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With that relief came more troubling thoughts, but of a rational sort. Why, she wondered, was

access to OCD treatment so hard to come by? “There was this part of me that hated the fact that I only got the care I deserved because my parents could afford it,” she says. “My parents have spent over \$200,000 in treatment over the years, which is not something that the average family could do.”

Which is why, in 2005, the family started the Peace of Mind Foundation, which helps fund treatment for OCD sufferers, with McIngvale as its spokesperson. Lately, she has worked on developing videos for the foundation’s self-help website, ocdchallenge.org, which offers step-by-step guides to understanding and dealing with the illness. The site now has a thousand users across the globe, in every continent except Antarctica, and the videos will soon be available in nine languages. “One of my missions in life is to make treatment accessible to anyone in the world,” says McIngvale.

Another mission? “To define myself as a professional, and an expert, and a scholar, versus just Liz with OCD.”



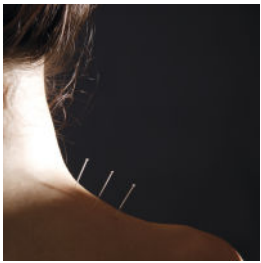
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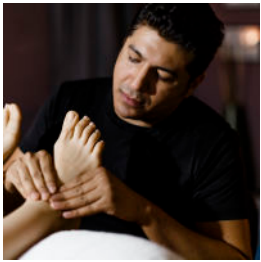
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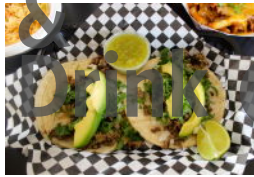
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