

SCRUPULOSITY: OVERCOMING RELIGIOUS OBSESSIONS AND COMPULSIONS

Peace of Mind Foundation Webinar – 9/9/19

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What is Scrupulosity?

- **Definition:** *Obsessions and compulsions containing religious themes, hypermorality, pathological doubt/worry about sin, and excessive religious behavior.*
 - Symptoms follow along the lines of moral/religious teaching of a particular religious group (e.g., don't lie, don't be impure, don't harm, have good motives).
 - Blasphemy, /sacrilege
 - Sex/immorality
 - Violence/harm
 - Clean/unclean – Pure/impure

Does Religion Cause OCD/Scrupulosity?

- Scrupulosity has been identified among followers of all of the major world religions.
 - The OCD tends to take on the characteristics of the person's religious and cultural beliefs.
- *“There is no evidence that religion causes OCD. However, your religious background and experience can influence the type of obsessional concerns that develop in people with OCD.”*

Examples of Scrupulous Obsessions

Intrusive Thoughts:

- Worry about committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or have committed the unpardonable sin.

Motive Doubting

- Worry you might have omitted something from a confession.

Altruistic Obsessions

- Worry about not sharing one's faith with others and being responsible for the other person going to hell.

Intrusive Sexual Thoughts

- Worry you get sexually aroused around children

Urges

- Feeling you might yell out a cuss word in church.

Images

- Sexual images of a religious figure.

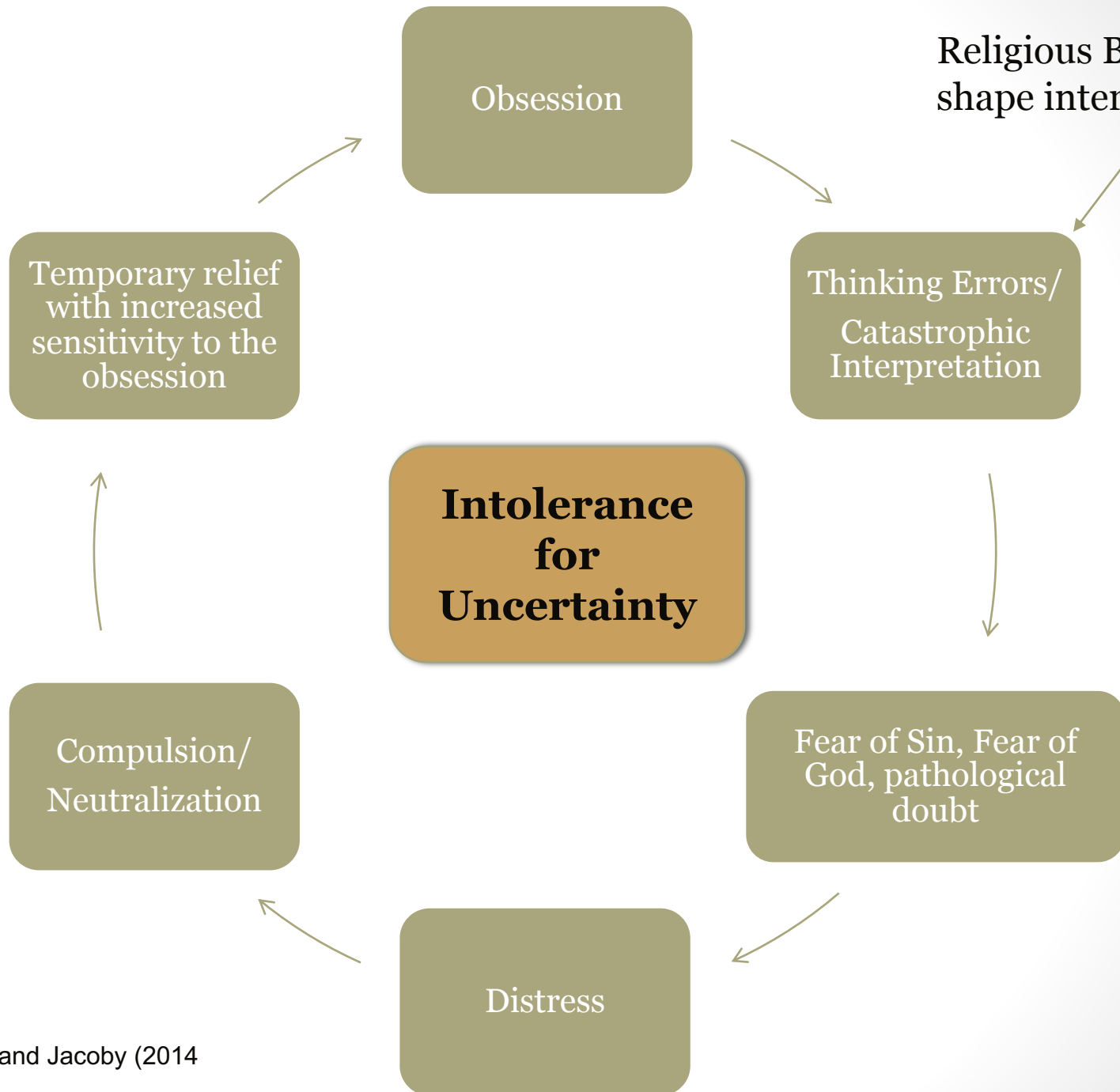
Examples of Scrupulous Compulsions

Neutralization and Mental Rituals

- Analyzing issues and situations over and over to try to gain certainty or to make sure you didn't sin.
- Repeating prayers until you feel a certain feeling.

Behavioral Compulsions and Avoidance

- Repetitive confessions
- Asking forgiveness for things one "might" have done.
- Reassurance seeking
- Checking/looking things up in the Bible or online
- Avoiding reading the Bible, prayer, going to church, etc.



Scrupulosity: The “Perfect Storm”

- Scrupulous obsessions involve content that the person interprets as **core** to their being.
- While there is a low likelihood of potential negative outcomes, it involves the **ultimate** in **catastrophic** consequences.
- **Uncertainty** is inherent in matters of faith and is misinterpreted as **uncertainty=doubt=danger**
- Feared consequences are **not directly testable** with behavioral experiments because the feared consequence occurs after death
- Many **competing** explanations and opinions add to confusion. *If you ask 100 people....*

The Role of Emotions and Feeling Peaceful

- Many people of faith routinely talk about feeling states, especially peacefulness, as part of their religious experience.
- When scrupulous clients are looking for peace, they are often times checking their emotions and physical sensations; particularly in their chest and abdomen.
- OCD gets in the way!!

Treatment of Scrupulosity: Adapting Standard Treatment

- Standard OCD Treatments apply to Scrupulosity
 1. Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT)
 2. Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP)
 3. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
 4. SSRI antidepressant medication
- ***The religious aspects of scrupulosity often require adjusting some facets of treatment.***
 - Not adapting treatment appropriately can lead to poorer outcomes and premature dropout from treatment.
 - Specifically, it is important that exposures not violate the person's religious beliefs. OCD treatment will violate OCD's rules.

Expectations for Treatment

- **“The goal is for you to be able to do whatever other people from your faith community can do as part of normal practice of your beliefs.”**
- May need to identify someone (pastor, mentor, etc.) who can help identify what is what is normative in a faith community vs. OCD.
- The 85% rule can also be used to help you identify what is normative.
 - If out of 100 people from your church, 85% or more do something, then it is normative.

View OCD as an Affliction

- Scrupulosity sufferers often feel they are failing in their faith which only tends to increase shame.
- Shift to viewing OCD as an affliction you are dealing with instead of a flaw in who you are.
- Ask yourself:
 - *How would you treat a good friend or loved one dealing with the same issues you are?*
 - *How do you think God feels about people dealing with afflictions and difficult circumstances?*
- ***Answer to both: Care and Compassion!***

Faith and Doubt and Uncertainty

- Faith is not the absence of feeling uncertain. Faith is going forward through the uncertainty.
- OCD wants me to believe that uncertainty and doubt are dangerous. While uncertainty is uncomfortable, it is not dangerous, and I can tolerate it.
- My faith is what I believe, not what I feel.
- Feelings are not facts.
 - I can have faith and still feel uncertain. *Mark 9:24, "...I believe; help my unbelief!"*
- God loves me completely, even when my feelings are uncertain and clouded by doubt.
- God understands that I don't understand.

Responsibility for Thoughts

“You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair”

– **Martin Luther**

- Individuals with OCD feel guilty for the fact that the “birds” (i.e., thoughts) are flying over their heads.
- Trying to stop or suppress those thoughts, accidentally makes them worse.

Key Treatment Phrase

“You must surrender trying to have absolute certainty about matters of faith.

--Instead, we want to focus on ‘walking faith’ which means to live out your faith by trusting God through the uncertainty.”

- Doing CBT/ACT/ERP for scrupulosity is an act of faith.

God Image Recovery

- Scrupulosity twists your perspective on who God is and how to relate to Him.
- It is key to follow your beliefs instead of your feelings.
- You may need help rebuilding and growing your faith. That's OK and it is important.
- Having a pastor or other clergy as part of your treatment team can be very helpful.
- God Image Recovery (how you picture God)
 - Example: Parents relating to children
- Common Question: Are Satan and OCD the same thing?
 - Example of Satan and the surf-board

ACT Skills

- ACT Defusion skills can help you detach from assigning meaning to obsessions which leads to fighting and analyzing.
 - When thoughts of a religious, sexual, or immoral nature come into your mind, you must reject the notion that you must fight, analyze, or control the obsessions in order to show God (or yourself) that you don't want them.
 - If you wonder if you have sinned (e.g., "What if I...?") or aren't sure if you have, then you need to move on and go forward as if you didn't. Keep moving forward.

ACT - Committed Action

- ACT Committed Action skills can help you focus on living a meaningful life instead of getting stuck in your head.
 - “Get out of your head and into your life.”

Online Resources on Scrupulosity

- **Ted's - Scrupulosity Info:** www.scrupulosity.org
 - Coping Statements for Christians with OCD and Scrupulosity
 - Principles of Effective and Religiously-Sensitive Exposures
 - Religious and Moral Scrupulosity in Christians
- **Ian Osborn, MD**
 - <http://ocdandchristianity.com>
- **Peace of Mind Foundation – Videos**
 - <http://www.peaceofmind.com/education/types-of-ocd/immoral-or-scrupulous-thoughts/>
- **Two-Screen Method of Mindfulness**
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3FEMbMXv6Q>

Helpful Books for Treatment

- Harris, R. (2014) The Illustrated Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living. Shambhala
- Knabb, J. (2016). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Christian Clients: A Faith-Based Workbook. Routledge.
- Osborn, I. (2008). Can Christianity Cure OCD?: A Psychiatrist Explores the Role of Faith in Treatment. Brazos
- Purdon, C., & Clark, D. (2005). Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts. New Harbinger.
- Symington, S. (2019). Freedom from Anxious Thoughts and Feelings. New Harbinger.