Pure Obsessionals & Covert Compulsions

OCD is well known for its curious obsessions and repetitive, often bizarre, compulsions. In fact, compulsions are usually the most noticeable part of the disorder. However, many people with OCD find they have no visible compulsions, only the repetitive mental agony of upsetting thoughts that won't go away. These thoughts usually are about aggression, religion, and sex (also called taboo thoughts). Interestingly, you almost never hear about people with this kind of OCD. Why? Because most of the action is taking place inside the person's head. Unlike people who wash their hands repeatedly or who keep checking locks, you don't really see the OCD action. These people are sometimes called pure-obsessionals, or pure-o for short.

The OCD Cycle

Although we don't know the exact cause of OCD, we do know quite a bit about what keeps the disorder going. You can think of OCD as a set of habits that involve intrusive thoughts that something very bad might happen (obsessions), followed by an urge to do something to prevent the bad thing from happening (a compulsion). The compulsion reduces the distress momentarily, and so the person gets into the habit of using these various special behaviors to get rid of the anxiety. When someone does this over and over again, we call it a compulsive ritual. Of course, rituals are only a temporary fix, as the obsession always comes back. In fact, the more compulsions you do, the stronger the OCD becomes.

This understanding of the OCD cycle is what gives us therapists our strongest tool for taking down the OCD demon, using a treatment called exposure and response prevention (Ex/RP). Interestingly, the fewer compulsions the person does, the weaker the OCD gets, so clients are taught how to stop doing rituals and embrace the anxiety. You can think of OCD as a fire, and every time you do a compulsion, you’re throwing it a log. Once the fuel stops coming, the fire dies out.

So, based on what we know about how OCD is maintained, it is actually impossible for someone with OCD to only have obsessions, because OCD will eventually disappear with no compulsions to feed it. In short, pure-o can't exist.

The Pure Obsessional

So, where did we even get the idea that the pure-obsessionals may be out there at all? The first study to really take a scientific look at OCD symptom clusters was published by Dr. Lee Baer in 1994. He studied 107 OCD patients who had completed a long checklist of OCD symptoms called the Yale–Brown Obsessive-Compulsive checklist. He found three types of OCD that he called Symmetry/Hoarding, Contamination/Checking, and Pure Obsessions. This last subtype included people with aggressive, sexual, and religious obsessions, but no compulsions. Thus it was believed that the “Pure Obsessions” group had no rituals, just their own troubled thoughts.
However, at that time no one was really taking a good hard look at other types of compulsions that aren't so flashy. For example, consider a woman with OCD who gets unwanted thoughts to stab her husband with a steak knife. She might do any number of compulsions to make the thought go away. She might mentally retrace her steps to be sure she didn't touch a knife. She might do repetitive silent prayers that no harm comes to her husband. She might take a mental inventory of all the good things she's done to convince herself that she's a morally upright person. She might ask for reassurance from her husband that she's a good person and would never do such a terrible thing. These types of behaviors are sometimes called covert rituals because you don't actually see the compulsions in the same way you do when someone can't stop washing their hands.

Another example would be a young man who worries that he might become gay or fears that perhaps he has been gay all along. Mental rituals can include many different compulsions that take place in the mind. An example of a mental ritual would be if he mentally reviews experiences with the opposite sex to convince himself that he enjoyed being with females, thus confirming he is not gay. He might try to visualize two men kissing, and if he felt a negative gut reaction, he may be temporarily satisfied that he is not turning gay. If he doesn't feel the desired reaction, he repeats the mental imagery until he experiences the desired result. He may also avoid being around other men in a locker room or at the pool, as seeing other men triggers his worries.

Covert rituals can include a variety of behaviors, such as mental compulsions and reassurance-seeking. Mental compulsions may include mental repetition of special words, mental reviewing, and mental undoing. Reassurance-seeking may include asking others for reassurance, self-assurance, or confessing to others. Even Internet searching can be a covert compulsion as the person with OCD seeks reassurance online in forums, chat rooms, or information websites—much in the same way a hypochondriac seeks reassurance from doctors.

Pure-O and Covert Compulsions: The Link

Current research shows that if Baer had included these types of rituals in his study, he might have had some very different findings. When mental rituals and reassurance-seeking are added into the picture, they fall neatly into the category that Baer had termed “Pure Obsessional.” So, it seems quite possible that the pure obsessional just doesn’t exist.

The bottom line: people who think they are pure-o are likely doing covert compulsions. Ex/RP for OCD is extremely effective, but it requires a thorough examination of both a person’s obsessions and compulsions. If someone with OCD gets Ex/RP, but the covert rituals are not addressed, then treatment will be incomplete. This can lead to a speedy relapse. Therapists treating OCD need to always address covert rituals. People with OCD need to understand that these acts are part of the clinical picture.