Figuring It Out:

Understanding and Managing Rumination as a Compulsion in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

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Agenda

Schedule and Topics of Today's Training

Agenda

Introduction and brief review of OCD and its treatments; exploring rumination as compulsion

Attention vs. Awareness and rumination justification

Non-engagement responses and other skills for managing rumination

Case examples, role play, and Q&A

Learning Objectives:

- Be able to define and identify compulsive rumination in OCD
- Differentiate between attention and awareness
- Learn how to implement non-engagement responses with clients
- Gain competence in troubleshooting typical pitfalls of non-engagement responses and apply these to cases

Defining OCD

DSM-5

A. Presence of obsessions, compulsions, or both:

- Obsessions are defined by (1) and (2):
  - 1. Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or impulses that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted, and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress.
  - 2.The individual attempts to ignore or suppress such thoughts, urges, or images, or to neutralize them with some other thought or action (i.e., by performing a compulsion).
- Compulsions are defined by (1) and (2):
  - 1. Repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly.
  - 2. The behaviors or mental acts are aimed at preventing or reducing anxiety or distress, or preventing some dreaded event or situation; however, these behaviors or mental acts are not connected in a realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent, or are clearly excessive.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Pearson.

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Defining OCD

DSM-5

B. The obsessions or compulsions are time-consuming (e.g., take more than 1 hour per day) or cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

C. The obsessive-compulsive symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.

D. The disturbance is not better explained by the symptoms of another mental disorder (e.g., excessive worries, as in generalized anxiety disorder; preoccupation with appearance, as in body dysmorphic disorder; difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, as in hoarding disorder; hair pulling, as in trichotillomania [hair-pulling disorder]; skin picking, as in excoriation [skin-picking] disorder; stereotypies, as in stereotypic movement disorder; ritualized eating behavior, as in eating disorders; preoccupation with substances or gambling, as in substance-related and addictive disorders; preoccupation with having an illness, as in illness anxiety disorder; sexual urges or fantasies, as in paraphilic disorders; impulses, as in disruptive, impulse-control, and conduct disorders; guilty ruminations, as in major depressive disorder; thought insertion or delusional preoccupations, as in schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders; or repetitive patterns of behavior, as in autism spectrum disorder).

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Understanding OCD

- If client meets criteria, ANYTHING can be an obsession or compulsion, function and presentation of both are what matter
- There are many common themes that are helpful for clients to see in others, but these are **not at all exhaustive**
  - Morality
  - Pedophilia
  - Harm
  - Contamination
  - Sexuality
  - Just Right
  - And others…
- A compulsion can be ANYTHING aimed at reducing distress, achieving certainty, preventing negative consequences, suppressing a thought…
  - Compulsions do not always act alone
  - When one compulsion is prevented, be wary of neutralization or compensatory compulsions
  - Rumination is an extremely common compulsion that tags along in all phases

OCD Treatment Strategies Referenced/Utilized in this Training

ERP

Exposure and Response Prevention

Expose client to feared stimulus and intentionally, strategically, and hierarchically resist compulsive behaviors that are aimed at neutralizing discomfort or preventing negative outcomes

ACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Accept and allow the presence of unwanted thoughts and feelings and make value-oriented decisions to reduce suffering and increase psychological flexibility

MCT

Metacognitive Therapy

Help the individual shift from attempting to control or suppress thoughts and reduce overall fusion with thoughts

RF-ERP

Rumination-Focused ERP

Disengage from the content of obsessions and break compulsive reasoning patterns through “doing nothing” instead of any effortful behavior (primarily thinking behavior)

The Misnomer of "Pure O" and Rumination

- "Purely Obsessional" OCD
- Has been used to differentiate from other forms of OCD
- Reaching beyond the DSM-5, there is no OCD if there is no compulsion in my clinical experience
- Mental compulsions are often confused for obsessions by clinicians and clients
    - Client experience will often corroborate this
- "Pure O" may be helpful for client or therapist to find community or draw connections, but psychoeducation around mental behavior is incredibly important

Williams, M. T., Farris, S. G., Turkheimer, E., Pinto, A., Ozanick, K., Franklin, M. E., Liebowitz, M., Simpson, H. B., & Foa, E. B. (2011). Myth of the pure obsessional type in obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Depression and Anxiety, 28*(6), 495–500. https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20820

Mental Compulsions Beyond Rumination Proper

Prayer

Counting

Repeating Words

Listmaking

Excessive Review

and more...

You **CANNOT** control obsessions, but you **CAN** control mental behaviors

Name: _____ Date: _____

Pemdas Worksheets

1. $48 - [(17 - 9) - 5] \times 4 =$ _____
2. $[8 \times (23 - 19)] \div 2 =$ _____
3. $32 \times 2 - [39 - (21 - 11 - 5)] =$ _____
4. $6 + [(21 - 17) \times 12] =$ _____
5. $5 \times [23 - (18 - 4)] =$ _____
6. $[48 - (17 - 9 - 5)] \times 4 =$ _____
7. $48 - 17 - 9 - 5 \times 4 =$ _____
8. $[(48 - 17) - (9 - 5)] \times 4 =$ _____
9. $70 - [(23 - 12) \times 5] \div (14 - 9) =$ _____
10. $[(12 - 9) \times 4] + 2 \times 4 =$ _____

Directed Attention vs. Awareness

Directed attention towards a stimulus is a controllable practice

- Figuring out a thought or how to make it go away
- Figuring out what it means to have a thought
- Trying to solve a problem or question
- Monitoring what you are noticing
- Visualizing something

Something being present in your awareness is an uncontrollable experience

- Thought occurring to you
- Knowing you have a distressing problem or question
- Noticing something
- Image popping into your mind

Greenberg, M. (2020, September 18). *Awareness, Attention, Distraction, and Rumination.* Dr. Michael J. Greenberg. https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/awareness-attention-distraction-and-rumination/

How Clients Describe Rumination

- “An argument between my logical self and my rational self”
- “Two layers of conversation”
- “It feels like there are two parts of me”
- “Constant noise in my head”
- Mental Ping Pong
- Losing trust in myself – I don’t know anything

Common Justifications for Rumination

- “I need to figure this out before I do something that causes irreversible damage.”
- “If I let myself think these thoughts without fighting back, that will cause irreversible damage.”
- “I need to keep an eye on this to make sure I catch the problem early or prevent it from getting worse.”
- “Figuring this out is the only way I’ll ever feel normal again.”
- “I’m on the verge of figuring this out/accepting the truth.”
- “I’m really stressed right now, so just this once.”
- “This isn’t really OCD; I’m just in denial/unwilling to accept the truth.”
- “A bad person would ignore these thoughts, it would mean I don’t care or I want the bad thing to happen”
- “I can’t handle being responsible for this”
- “The only way to get rid of this thought is to answer it.”
- “What if it gets worse?”
- “I know what it feels like to ruminate, and I know I can at least survive that.”
- “I need to be SURE”
- “At least I’m doing something”
- “If I’m thinking about it, I can delay making the choice I’m not ready to make”
- “I can’t stop, it’s just how my mind works, I’m sure this works for others but not for me”
- “If I’m uncomfortable, that must mean it’s bad”

Greenberg, M. (2020b, September 18). *How are You Justifying Rumination? – Dr. Michael J. Greenberg*. Dr. Michael J. Greenberg. https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/how-are-you-justifying-rumination/

Categories of Justifications

1. Ruminating will prevent something bad from happening

2. Ruminating will help me figure something out

3. Ruminating will help me feel better

Greenberg, M. (2020b, September 18). *How are You Justifying Rumination? – Dr. Michael J. Greenberg*. Dr. Michael J. Greenberg. https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/how-are-you-justifying-rumination/

Clients Lose Against OCD When They...

1. Believe that a true threat exists EVERY TIME a worry or an anxious feeling pops up.

2. Believe that they should get rid of distress and worry EVERY TIME they show up.

3. Believe that they don't have what it takes to face their problems directly.

Wilson, R. (2019, April 24). *Your Game-Winning Strategy: Kick Content to the Curb.* Anxieties.com; Anxiety Disorders Treatment Center. https://anxieties.com/blog/your-game-winning-strategy-kick-content-to-the-curb/

Non-Engagement Response Types

1. Affirmation of Anxiety

“That thought is making me anxious”

2. Affirmation of Possibility

“Maybe, maybe not”

3. Affirmation of Uncertainty

“I’ll never know”

4. Affirmation of Difficulty

“That would suck”

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You’re Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong/

Example of Engaging with OCD

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

Obsession (O): "The HIV test result could have been a false negative."

No, that's unlikely, false negatives are incredibly rare… *what makes you so special that the rare thing wouldn't happen to you?* I trust my doctor, this doesn't feel helpful… *don't people talk about bad medical doctors all the time? Aren't I supposed to advocate for myself?* Sure, but I really don't think that's necessary here, I would know if I had reason not to trust the doctor… *wow… what kind of person does this knowingly to their sexual partner?* That's not what I'm doing, I'm trying to trust my doctor… *sure, keep telling yourself that…*

Affirmation of Anxiety

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation*. https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

Obsession (O): "The HIV test result could have been a false negative."

NER: "I'm feeling anxious about that." (Rather than reassuring yourself that the results were accurate)

O: "You should be feeling anxious. You could give your partner a terrible disease because of your denial."

NER: "Feeling really anxious about that idea."
O: "It's not an idea; it's reality."
NER: "Feeling anxious about the idea that it's a reality."

Example of Engaging with OCD

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

O: "You didn't say 'thank you' to the cashier a minute ago. What if you really offended him?"

I doubt it, I don't think he made a face or anything… *or did he? Let me try to think about whether he made a face, just to be sure…* I think I would remember if he made a face at me. *Your memory has failed before, remember when you forgot to pick up your sister?* I guess that's true… but I probably wasn't the worst customer all day. I didn't mean to forget. *What if you were the last straw? What if he had a terrible day and you cemented it, and what if he's already depressed?* No, no, he seemed fine, I really think it's an honest mistake… *maybe I need to go back and apologize just in case?*

Affirmation of Uncertainty

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O: "You didn't say 'thank you' to the cashier a minute ago. What if you really offended him?"

NER: "I don't know for sure whether or not I offended him." **O:** "What if he was already having a bad day and you just made it worse?"

NER: "I don't know if he was having a bad day, and I don't know if I offended him. No matter how much I try to think it through, I'm not going to know."

O: "But he might think you're incredibly rude."
NER: "I don't know what he thought, and I'm not going to know."

Example of Engaging with OCD

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O: "That bump you just ran over — it could've been a person."

I would've heard someone, I don't think hit and runs just happen like that without people knowing… *what kind of person dismisses a thought like this? This is not worth chancing.* I did this last week, and I drove back and nothing happened. I can't keep doing this. *Wow, using your OCD as an excuse yet again… you're only a half mile away, is your time that important?* I think I would remember hitting someone. *How do you know that? How can you be 100% sure? You should be 100% sure you didn't kill someone… that's the right thing to do…* I'm pretty sure, but maybe I should go check, it won't take long… *how do you know that you're going to check the right place, even?*

Affirmation of Possibility

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

O: "That bump you just ran over — it could've been a person."

NER: "Maybe, anything is possible."

O: "The responsible thing to do is to drive back and check."

NER: "Maybe so, maybe not, but I'm not going to check."

O: "You're leaving yourself open to being charged with a hit and run."

NER: "Maybe. Anything is possible in this world."

O: "You're going to risk that? Your life will be destroyed." **NER:** "Maybe, anything is possible."

Example of Engaging with OCD

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

O: "What if the fact you loved the movie and he hated it means he's not the one?"

I don't like that, but I don't think that's how relationships work… *how would you know? All of your relationships have ended up until now, haven't they?* I guess, but I really don't want to think about this right now. I can't keep thinking this. *You're going to avoid thinking about whether you are with the one or not? How long is that charade going to last?* I like him and we have the same values. He's kind, respectful, driven, we both want kids and… *you're just going to take him at his word? Didn't you just read about someone faking their entire personality in a relationship?* I'm trying to trust that he's good… I don't think this is a sign… *but if it is, you're wasting his time and are choosing to die alone… do you really want that?*

Affirmation of Difficulty

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation.* https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-this-what-to-do-when-youre-stuck-playing-mental-ping-pong

O: "What if the fact you loved the movie and he hated it means he's not the one?"

NER: "Well, that would suck."
O: "Yeah, it would — he seems great in so many ways. What if this is a sign?"
NER: "Clearly, that would also suck. Duh."

O: "No, seriously, you could end up wasting years of your life with the wrong guy."

NER: "That, like millions of other bad things that could happen, would most definitely suck."

OCD: "But what if you waste so much time that you never find anyone and end up alone..."

NER: "That too would of course suck. Obviously."

Unchecked Compulsive Reasoning

What if I hit someone with my car and didn't feel it?

(anxiety spike, urge to resolve immediately)

No, that's ridiculous, I would've felt it

(potential temporary relief)

How would you know? You've never hit someone before, how do you know what that feels like?

(anxiety spikes again, urge to resolve)

I guess I wouldn't know... but I really don't think I did. There would have been a sound.

(potential temporary relief)

What kind of person denies this? You should go back and check. You were listening to loud music, you shouldn't have been doing that.

(anxiety spikes again, urge to resolve)

No I shouldn't go back and check, this feels like OCD and that's a compulsion. I really don't think I did.

(potential temporary relief)

How could you call this OCD? Someone else's life is on the line! Remember when you hit the curb a few years ago? You're a terrible driver!

(anxiety spikes again, urge to resolve)

That has nothing to do with this, but maybe I can compromise and look up hit and runs on the police blotter...to be sure...

(potential temporary relief, now with plan to engage in physical compulsion, feeding the vicious cycle)

Distress and distrust climbing, despite aim for relief

Compulsive Reasoning Urges with Non-Engagement Responses

Distress present due to obsession, but not growing much when done correctly

What if I hit someone with my car and didn't feel it?

(anxiety spike, urge to resolve immediately)

That would suck!

(Discomfort in challenging urgency)

That's all? Of course it would suck... shouldn't you do something about this?

(anxiety remains, but not worsening)

The idea of being unsure is making me anxious.

(anxiety holding steady, possibly even decreasing with habituation)

This isn't just an idea, you ARE unsure, and that is dangerous. What if you're a dangerous person and don't realize it?

(anxiety still present)

That would definitely suck! I guess I'll never know!

(possible relief in empowerment)

It more than sucks... seriously, what if that was a person?

(anxiety spikes again, urge to resolve)

That would suck.

OCD may get bored, fade into the background awareness, may return, may stay persistent...

Attitude is Everything

- **Assertive** and brave as opposed to admission of defeat
- Used as **conclusions**, not invitations for further discussion
- Match OCD's **persistence**
  - These are meant to be persistent skills for management, not solutions to OCD
  - If the thoughts come back, that means they left and can again!

Levine, L. (2020). How Do I Stop Thinking About This? What to Do When You're Stuck Playing Mental Ping Pong. *International OCD Foundation*. https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/how-do-i-stop-thinking-about-thisstuck-pl-what-to-do-when-youre-aying-mental-ping-pong

Troubleshooting

- Perfectionism in treatment
  - Am I doing it right?
- Perfectionism in thought
- Negative self talk when catching/labeling
- You WILL continue to ruminate
- These are skills to MANAGE symptoms, not eliminate them
  - Clients are often used to seeking elimination
  - “Right goal vs. Wrong goal”
- “What do I think/do instead?”
  - Discomfort in not worrying about anything
- Other compulsions can trigger rumination, treatment can trigger rumination, rumination can trigger other compulsions
- Different from habituation model — resisting rumination may actually provide relief

Aureen Pinto Wagner. (2002). *What to Do when Your Child Has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.* Lighthouse Press, Inc.

Additional Strategies

- Agreeing with the thought or “lean in”
- Sarcasm/sass
- Thank you, brain or Thanks, OCD
- Setting a timer to practice NERs, or giving OCD a limit
- “Undo” the ritual if it has begun
- Encourage rumination, and then invite the client “back”
- Metaphors
    - Unwanted Party Guest (ACT)
    - Noisy passenger
    - Math problem
    - Arguing with a bad lawyer (“your honor, it’s POSSIBLE!”)
    - “Put your pencils down”
    - “Slow down” in the car

Wilson, R. (2019, April 24). *Your Game-Winning Strategy: Kick Content to the Curb.* Anxieties.com; Anxiety Disorders Treatment Center. https://anxieties.com/blog/your-game-winning-strategy-kick-content-to-the-curb/

Harris, R. (2007). *The Happiness Trap.* Robinson.

Examples of Additional Strategies in Practice

Lean In

What if you are a terrible person and that's why you walked past that stray cat without petting it?

I sure am, lock me up!

Sarcasm

What if you weren't careful enough at work and everyone gets sick and dies?

Oh boy, I sure hope so! My annual review will go swimmingly with no competition!

Thanks, Brain

What if you control while driving today? Maybe you shouldn't leave the house.

Thank you for that, OCD!

Value Reminder

You just thought that person was attractive. What if you secretly want to cheat on your partner and don't know it yet?

Thanks for the reminder of what's important to me, OCD.

Harris, R. (2007). *The Happiness Trap*. Robinson.

Case Examples and NER Roleplay

Questions?

Thank You!

Dylan McKessy, LCSW via The Center for OCD and Anxiety

Referrals for Anxiety and OCD Clients:

https://pittsburghocdtreatment.com/contact/

Training Institute and Consultation

https://pittsburghocdtreatment.com/training-and-consultation/

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