

My Parents Don't Believe I Have OCD

Written by Fred Penzel

Sunday, 18 January 2015 18:06 - Last Updated Tuesday, 27 January 2015 15:56

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By: Fred Penzel, Ph.D.

Living with OCD is never easy, and this can be especially true if you are a teenager. At a time when you're trying hard to learn about who you are and how to find a place for yourself in the world, having a disorder like OCD can make you feel so different from everyone else. And the thought of having to talk about the disorder with anyone, let alone your friends and classmates, can be very scary. School is a small world, and things have a way of getting around pretty quickly, or so it can seem.

But talking to people and asking for help are the best ways to improve your situation. Your schoolmates may surprise you with their capacity for understanding. We often fear what we don't understand. And your parents can help you to get the help and resources you need to succeed in school and beyond.

But what happens when your parents, the very people who should be most concerned about your well-being, don't understand OCD and don't know how to help you? Or worse yet, don't believe that you are suffering from a disorder at all? I get many emails from young people seeking advice and guidance, and occasionally these include messages like the following:

Dear Dr. Penzel,

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I don't know if you can help me, but I have a really serious problem and I don't know how to handle it. I think I have OCD. I was in health class in school and we were doing a lesson on mental health. When the teacher started describing the signs of OCD, I realized that it sounded just like me. When I got home, I went online and looked it up, and again it sounded just like me. I have two different kinds of thoughts that just won't go away. One kind tells me that I want to harm people, like stabbing them with a pencil in class, or pushing them down the stairs. I don't just get them in school – I also get them at home and they can be about my family or my dog. I also get thoughts that I could be gay. Both of these thoughts really scared me and I feel like I'm not sure about myself any more. Some of the things I read online told me that these thoughts really aren't things I want to do, and that you can get help. When I read these articles, it can help for a little while, but it doesn't last.

I told my teacher that I think I have OCD, and he told me that I should talk to my parents so that I could get help for this. This is where the biggest problem comes in. I told my mom and dad about what was happening, and they acted like I was making all of it up. My dad said, "I don't believe in things like that. It's just your imagination, and if you're trying to get attention, it's not a very good way to do it." My mom was nicer, but she said that when people hear about different symptoms in classes like the one I'm taking, they start imagining that they have them, too. They said that because I had friends and was doing well in sports (I play basketball), and my grades were okay, there couldn't be anything wrong. They didn't want to go on talking about it, and said it would go away after a while when I got busy with other things. I just couldn't make them understand, and now I'm afraid I won't be able to get any help for this.

I feel really hopeless and don't know what to do. I want to beat this thing but I won't be able to get help on my own. What should I do?

While I don't believe that this happens in every home, I have a hunch that situations like this happen a lot more than we would like them to. Someone once said, "The only thing worse than having OCD is having OCD alone." I think that e-mails like this prove it. It takes a lot of work to recover from this disorder, but it also shouldn't be such hard work to get help from those close to you.

No one wants to think that his or her child has a problem, much less a psychological one. It's one thing if a child has had serious problems from an early age, but it is quite different if a child has always appeared to function well. In the former case, parents have many years to come to terms with it, get advice, and to seek help. This is not so in the latter case. Some parents find it

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so unthinkable that they resort to denial, figuring that if they act like they don't see it, it doesn't exist. Sometimes it can become even a bit more complicated, with one parent believing that their son or daughter has OCD, and the other one stubbornly refusing to see it, resulting in family disputes and an overall stressful family environment. As we know, this doesn't turn out to be a very good strategy. It can set a teen against their parents, or it can set one parent against another, making one into a hero and the other a villain. I have also met some parents who are flatly opposed to the concept of mental illness altogether. They see it as some kind of myth. I have been told by parents on a few occasions that, "You guys [therapists] just like to make people believe they have problems so you can get them to come for treatments," or "She's just making this up, and if we just use some more discipline and don't put up with it, she'll stop doing these things."

No one who truly understands OCD would dispute that such a thing exists, and fortunately, many parents are understanding, empathetic, and go out of their way to get their children the treatment they need. However, when a teen or child does encounter resistance from their parents, what options do they have?

"What Can I Do?"

- Talk to the people in school, especially your health education teacher and the school psychologist. Both should have heard of OCD and can be good people to get on your side. Perhaps they can help set up a meeting with your parents to discuss the problem and possibly help them to understand what it is all about, and what you need.
- If you have a relative with OCD (we often see OCD run in families), he or she can sometimes be a good ally. This is especially true if this is a trusted individual your parents will listen to. It's always a plus if they got help themselves, and are now doing better. Perhaps they can persuade your parents to take you for help.
- It is possible you also have a friend who happens to have OCD and has been through successful treatment. A conservative estimate is that one out of one hundred people has OCD, so the odds are good that you may know someone. You might see if your friend's parents would be willing to talk to your parents and share what they have learned about the disorder and about how to get therapy for it. It will also be a big help if your parents already know these people.
- Read up on OCD and educate yourself about the disorder. You can start with articles here on the International OCD Foundation's website and on OCDinKids.org, and also check your local library for books on the subject. There are many good books these days, and the more you know, the better you will be able to speak up for yourself. Whatever you do, always make sure you are getting your information from reliable sources. The IOCDF has a list of many book about OCD on the website at iocdf.org/books.
- If you find yourself getting angry with your parents for not understanding, be careful about fighting with them about this. This is one of the most unhelpful things you can do for

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yourself. When people are angry, they listen to you a lot less and become more stubborn about sticking to their ideas. To get their help and support, you need to win them over. Remember that they do care about you, but just don't "get it" yet. It's something they clearly don't understand or have much information about. One helpful approach would be to get some good articles and books on the subject (again, check the IOCDF website at iocdf.org/expert-opinions and iocdf.org/books) and ask them if they will at least read them before deciding anything further. One book I'd suggest is, *What To Do When Your Child Has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, by Dr. Aureen Pinto Wagner. You can also find some good personal videos or documentaries about OCD on YouTube they can watch (the IOCDF's YouTube page is a good place to start). Just be sure that the videos aren't too extreme and give good, clear information. Watch them yourself, first, just to make sure.

- If you are feeling really alone and just need a community to talk to, you may find an in-person or online OCD support group for teens helpful (click [here](#) for more information about available support groups). You might also be interested in accessing some of the online self help programs that are now available (click [here](#) for more information about these self help programs for OCD and related disorders).

- Finally, if you belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, and have a good relationship with a leader in that community, you might be able to talk to them and ask them to speak to your parents. Parents will often listen to people in authority that they respect and who are seen as honest, caring, and helpful.

The main thing is to not get discouraged, and to not give up. If you continue looking for a way to get through to them, you will be more likely to find a solution than if you give in to your frustrations and quit. As we already said, don't talk your parents about it in an angry or nagging way that might only get them annoyed at you. You want to win them over, and you want them to see that you are serious, and are really having difficulties that require special help.

Once you manage to convince them, the next step is finding the right kind of help that will get you well in the quickest and most effective way. OCD is not something that just any psychologist or social worker simply knows how to treat. It takes someone with special training. If you have done your research, you will have found out that what is known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the way to go, and a specific type of CBT known as exposure & response prevention (E&RP) is the type of treatment you want. It will help you to gradually learn to face and overcome your fearful thoughts, as well as teach you better ways to confront your anxiety without having to do compulsions. The IOCDF website can give you further reliable information about this. Medication is sometimes also used to help you do better with your therapy. Understand that medication is not something that is automatically used with everyone, and is something that is only used when someone is seen to be struggling with their therapy. Even then, it is a matter to be carefully discussed with your therapist and physician.

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I did give the young person who wrote to me some of the above advice, but I never heard back from him. I'm hoping he showed his parents my reply, and that they chose to get him help. After all, everyone deserves a fair chance to get well.

Dr. Penzel is a licensed psychologist, and holds both a PhD from Hofstra University in School and Clinical Psychology. He has been involved in the treatment of OCD since 1982. He is the executive director of Western Suffolk Psychological Services. Within his practice, he specializes in the Cognitive/Behavioral treatment of OCD, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Body-focused Repetitive Behaviors such as Trichotillomania and Compulsive Skin-picking, Panic and Agoraphobia, phobias, and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Dr. Penzel is a founding member of the International Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation Science & Clinical Advisory Board. He is also the author of "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders: A Complete Guide To Getting Well And Staying Well (Oxford University Press).

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