

OCD Triggers Runaway Fear Response, Study Finds

by G. Bossik on April 11th, 2012 at 8:29 am

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Canadian scientists have learned that a key factor in [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) (OCD) prevents patients from stopping certain compulsive behaviors.¹

This discovery was recently documented in a study entitled, *When Too Much Is Not Enough: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder as a Pathology of Stopping, Rather Than Starting.*

Scientists from McMaster University and the University of Waterloo found that patients with OCD were unable to eliminate the feeling of danger after being exposed to contaminants.

"The results of these experiments show that OCD reflects impairment in the ability of security-related behavior to terminate motivation evoked by potential danger, rather than a heightened sensitivity to potential threat," scientists reported in the published findings.

In the study, Andrea L. Hinds and four scientific colleagues tested fifty-seven OCD patients with washing compulsions and fifty-seven non-patients who comprised a control group.

According to the scientists, the heart rate of each participant was monitored with electrodes as he or she reached in to a bin and touched either Styrofoam; clean, dry diapers; or wet diapers.

Both the OCD group and the control group showed similar changes in heart rate after touching the diapers, but patients from the OCD group couldn't eliminate the feeling of contamination after extensive hand washing.

"... even though the OCD patients washed much longer than controls ... their level of satisfaction with their hand-washing remained significantly lower than that of the controls," the scientists reported in the study.

In other words, the OCD patients couldn't find a way to feel clean.

The inability of people with OCD to stop engaging in fear-induced behavior may provide helpful clues for eliminating this behavior, say the scientists, who add that stopping such behavior has already become part of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

CBT shows people how thoughts influence behavior and how to change their behavior, according to the [National Association of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists](#).

So, by understanding that compulsive hand washing is caused by fear of contamination, OCD patients can work on minimizing or eliminating that fear.

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Sources:

1. Andrea L. Hinds et al, "When Too Much Is Not Enough: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder as a Pathology of Stopping, Rather than Starting," PLoS One.

2 Responses to "OCD Triggers Runaway Fear Response, Study Finds"

sandy roth
May 10th, 2012
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what brings about the fear and panic component

G. Bossik
May 11th, 2012
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Hi, Sandy.

In OCD, fear and panic are brought about by the constant repetition of thoughts. The repeating thoughts create anxiety that builds into panic when the thoughts don't stop.

That's the reason for the compulsions. They're done to try to alleviate anxiety and fear.

Fortunately, cognitive behavioral therapy has proven to be successful in helping OCD patients cope with obsessions and compulsions.

Glenn

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