

Local

— SPOTLIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH —

Scrupulosity: When Obsessive Compulsive Disorder meets religion

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“Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) often tells us that the only acceptable way to practice religion is to practice it with a perfect sense of knowing. This is actually incompatible with the idea that faith involves believing in something that can’t be seen or verified,” says Steven J. Seay, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist who practices in Florida.

OCD is primarily defined as a malfunctioning of the decision-making process in a person’s brain. Often called the “doubter’s disease,” OCD is most certainly not limited to obsessions with order or habitual compulsions such as hand-washing.

A lesser known subset of OCD, referred to by psychologists as scrupulosity, is driven by doubt, fear, and feelings of guilt—with emphasis on religion.

A study by C.H. Miller and D.W. Hedges in the “Journal of Anxiety Disorders 22,” shows that at least five percent, and up to 33%, of OCD sufferers are plagued by scrupulosity.

Father Thomas M. Santa, author of “Understanding Scrupulosity: Helpful Answers for Those Who Experience Nagging Questions and Doubts,” says scrupulosity is “a habitual state of mind that, because of an unreasonable fear of sin, inclines a person to judge certain thoughts or actions sinful when they are not, or that they are more gravely wrong than they really are.”

The scrupulous mindset often allows for God’s forgiveness in theory, but not in practice.

Up close and outside of textbooks and interviews, scrupulosity is painful and devastating.

In a true story of scrupulosity out of northeast Oregon, John and Jane (whose real names have been changed), are in a long-term marriage. Bright, funny, and in a community leadership position, as John puts it, he has “no connection whatsoever” with his wife, whom he is aware has had multiple emotional and, he believes, physical affairs.

John and Jane have no ability to hold so much as a conversation, and for a large part of their marriage, he has tried to make himself fall back in love with her to no avail. “There is no physical or emotional intimacy,” he says. Both turn to alcohol consumption in order to cope.

Desperately empty and lonely, for years John has both desired and attempted to leave the marriage, but for religious reasons (John is Christian) he has repeatedly returned to the marriage in attempts to fix it.

An abuse component also exists wherein Jane, among many other things, suggests that if he does leave her, she will lose his relationship with his grandchildren. He calls it, “Emotional extortion.”

He says when Jane lists out everything she loses if he divorces her, all he can silently think is, “But I don’t love you...”

John has envisioned a

relationship in which he can sit holding the hand of the one he loves on a porch swing at 80-years-old.

“I’m in a position to do all these things I want when I retire, but the problem is, I’ve never had the person I want to do it all with,” he says. John says this realization struck home fully when he had to force himself to buy an anniversary gift for Jane, knowing he didn’t want another empty year.

Later, John met Mary, with whom he fell deeply in love. “I want to be married to my best friend,” he says.

John separated from Jane, but the real Christian sin of beginning a relationship with another woman before he was technically divorced triggered John’s OCD scrupulosity, creating so much guilt for that sin that it ballooned until it debilitated.

Then, all it took was a sentence or two from Jane stating that his love for Mary was a Satanic deception, to complicate matters with a downward spiral of fear and doubt.

To top it off, John turned to his fundamentalist

Baptist pastor for advice, and wound up on his knees in tears feeling condemned and “broken by the hand of God”—not your average human reaction to asking for guidance. A week-long anxiety attack followed.

By then, the scrupulosity had boiled over.

Father Santa writes, “Treating scrupulosity with any type of therapy is inherently problematic because scrupulosity is bound up with the practice of religion, and religion is a complex phenomenon. It is easy for clergy or one’s spiritual community inadvertently to reinforce scrupulous behavior because the latter so closely resembles devout religious behavior.”

Citing the “joy and completeness” he felt with Mary, John says he connected with a woman spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally for the first time in his life.

So, after more time, he began to inch forward with his divorce at a snail’s pace, separating again, visiting a divorce attorney, gathering information for the attorney, developing an exit strategy for moving, packing belongings, etc.

He expressed a hundred times over his hope that in the end, he and Mary would not end up apart, sounding strangely as if he had no control over the outcome of the situation.

Whenever Mary questioned his intent to divorce and removed herself from the situation, John would beg her to give him more time and not shut him out.

The fear and doubt planted in his head by the pastor and his estranged wife never really left his mind, as the OCD loop continued for months.

At nearly each step of the way, John said he knew in his heart what he needed to do and who he wanted—that was “never a question,” he says.

But at each step a feeling in his head said “something just wasn’t right” with the action. So he

would sit still in the marriage trying not to make any sudden movements until he could figure out what that “something” was.

Therapists across the board state that OCD pits the heart against the head, and the battle is to stop the sufferer from listening to the OCD-driven thoughts. What a patient feels in his heart and in his gut-level intuition rarely lines up with what’s in his head when it comes to a life change, say psychologists.

John went on to experience repeated “analysis paralysis,” ruminating over the “right” thing to do.

He struggles daily with parts of scripture that include almost exclusively “God hates divorce” and other text along that theme, and thinks about them constantly.

He acknowledges that if he remains in his marriage, he will also remain in love with Mary, re-committing the sin of adultery in his heart on a regular basis.

Jane is aware of his feelings, but will not initiate a divorce herself because she says his love is clearly just a deception of Satan, which plays on his illness.

John acknowledges he has a Biblical “out clause” for divorcing his wife due to adultery—but believes he has to prove it with better evidence first, yet can’t, because he can’t find scripture supporting one should look for proof.

He acknowledges there are Grace and forgiveness of sin in the Bible, and that full, healthy lives and relationships honor Jesus. However, those parts of scripture are pushed to the back of his mind as only the “God hates divorce” theme repeats. Jesus’s encouragement of love of self and others doesn’t outweigh “God hates divorce,” nor do lessons about compassion and love trumping legalism.

Seay lists several of the patterns John exhibits as scrupulosity: Mental rituals like repeatedly looking in the Bible for scripture of the same theme, but ignoring larger overarching themes; compulsive praying; excessive reading of religious texts; and constantly asking for reassurance from others who will support his doubt-driven interpretations.

John has stated time and again he wants to be certain of the will of God. At the risk of making the slightest mistake in what God may or may not want, John continues to sit in an unhealthy situation.

At last check, John has doubts about the love he has in Mary being from God and thinks it just might be a deceptive product of Satan, though, in contradiction he’ll always love her, he says.

He has nearly resigned himself to a future without joy, health or love in which he is externally with Jane but internally always in love with Mary, believing that situation must honor God in some way since he wouldn’t be divorced.

He says if Mary is gone, he will dive into work, focus on his grandkids and try to schedule as much time as possible alone and away from Jane to survive.

He has immersed himself in various translations of the Bible and inspirational texts to come to this conclusion, isolating himself from feedback that might contradict it. Doctrine from every major Christian denomination in the country on divorce and marriage falls on deaf ears.

On Christmas, John was with Mary, joyous and certain he had finally broken through his doubt to move on with life. On December 26th the OCD froze him again—and he folded like a house of cards this time.

John’s conclusion? “God doesn’t want me to divorce.” Because Mary then represented something God didn’t want, John began to shun her without explanation.

Martyrdom, avoidance, and over-the-top self-sacrifice are scrupulosity hallmarks.

John now also plans to sacrifice the job in which he’s been a success and give up his home in the area he didn’t want to leave, believing God wants him to.

John feels the sense of peace that OCD always creates when it tricks the brain out of change and action. That sense of peace reinforces the belief that he must have at last concretely discerned God’s will—for a while.

Now, instead of being 80-years-old with the love of his life on a porch swing, John lists avoiding the “regret” of “disappointing God” as his main goal.

John may believe for now he’s discovered God’s true will, but his despair is evidenced by a renewed round of excoriation, where the anxiety of his unhappy situation results in him picking holes in his skin—another affliction common to OCD. He appears as if the warmth and light have been drained from him—but that’s God’s will.

Untreated OCD sufferers save face by presenting that their actions spring from a desire to do the right thing—and rarely admit to a problem. With scrupulosity, the desire to do right and the problem are intertwined, though.

Seay points out, “Not all clergy are familiar with scrupulosity ... If you think about it, you’ll realize that these types of OCD-driven goals take faith completely out of religion.”

Christianity Today’s Katelyn Beaty sums up the illness by saying, “Scrupulosity is an obsession with one’s sins and ridding them at all costs.” Even if the cost is as high as the sacrifice of a once-in-a-lifetime love or one’s own health.

John states that if he can “get right with God” (a noble cause when done healthily) then somehow his situation will change. He believes if he just acts more perfectly according to scripture than he ever has in his life before, all will be well. Of course, this view completely annihilates the Biblical Christian view that one cannot earn one’s way through acts. It does support his “God hates divorce” ruminations and his OCD’s need not to act.



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May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Starting this week and ending in April, *The Baker County Press* will run a six-part series on the subject of mental health, two articles per month leading up to May. Written in installments by various reporters, the series will address both well-known and lesser known mental illnesses, their symptoms, how they affect individuals and families, and methods for treatment. We will move into areas like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Autism, Personality Disorders and more, stressing both tragedies and mental health successes. Remember, there is always help.

Beaty continues, “For the believer, an obsession with moral purity can stifle fruitful relationships with other Christians, and perhaps ironically, with the Lord himself. Instead of leading a believer to a deeper trust in God’s mercy on account of their sins—a trust that is meant to bring ‘peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,’ scrupulosity focuses the person back on the efforts of him or herself, which usually leads to excessive guilt and despair.”

In addition to feeling excessive fear and doubt, persons with scrupulosity often stew in their thoughts, display negative cognitive styles (believing things will go wrong that logically won’t), and fixate excessively on religious text, write Miller and Hedges.

They document that sufferers, “have poor insight or awareness, meaning that because their life is so governed by rules (legalese) they have determined for themselves that they have no idea of what it is like to live a typical person’s life, let alone practice religion in the typical fashion.”

In religious terms, they ignore the spirit of the law and focus on the letter of it.

John says, “But that’s all I’ve ever known.”

Seay states that scrupulosity can occur in any background, but more often appears when an OCD patient has been raised in a rigid or fundamentalist religious setting.

Seay suggests that “identifying one’s core religious beliefs ahead of major life decisions proves helpful.”

Scrupulosity sufferers should ask themselves questions that would apply across the board, such as:

- Does God expect me to be perfect?
- If I make a mistake or commit a sin, does my religion have procedures for obtaining forgiveness?
- Would God want my behaviors to be largely driven by obsessive-compulsive disorder?
- Would God want my relationship to my religion to be OCD-based or faith-based?
- Would God understand what’s going on in my head and want me to fight my OCD?
- If my treatment involves doing things

that might be considered potentially sinful, would God understand?

Writes Seay, “For anyone with scrupulosity/OCD, it’s unhelpful to define your goals in terms of impossibilities. You must set achievable treatment goals. For example, it would be unwise to select the goal of knowing for sure that you did the right thing or handled the situation the right way. Moreover, it would also be unhelpful to adopt the goal of trying to be 100% sure that God isn’t mad at you. For other people with scrupulosity, there may be the fear of hell/damnation and the unattainable goal of wanting to know 100% that you are saved. These types of goals just feed obsessive-compulsive symptoms. No matter what we do, we can never know these things in the ways that OCD tells us we should know them. Perfect certainty about faith and morality just isn’t possible.”

While in medieval times, scrupulosity sufferers were left to incessant confession, hair shirts and self-flagellation, in modern times, Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) Therapy, a form of cognitive-behavior therapy that bases its techniques in the theory that patients’ thoughts and emotions, can change lives as a result of changing patient behavior.

Specialists exist as near to Baker County as Boise, Idaho, and very often ERP can create controls on the OCD to the point medication is not recommended.

When asked to state that he wants a life with Jane and doesn’t want a life with Mary, John cannot get the words out of his mouth, but yet feels compelled to live that way. Last week he stated he still loves Mary, “And there’s no connection there with Jane at all. That never changes.”

At the time of print, John still cannot fully mentally separate his scrupulosity apart from true religious devotion in this situation—and has not sought help.

Mental illness does not have to mean tragedy. 911 is available 24/7. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Live Online Chat is also always there if you are suicidal or in distress.