

Client Worksheet 5

OCD Is 100% Imaginary

Lack of Direct Connect

One of the most important characteristics of obsessional doubts is that there is never any direct justification for the doubt in the here and now. Consider the following examples of obsessional doubts: ‘The door might be unlocked’, or ‘I might have been contaminated with something dirty’. You may have just stepped outside and locked the door, or you may have just touched a metal pole on the bus. But, was there anything in the here and now that actually justified these particular doubts? Did you actually sense anything that supported the doubt? For obsessions, the answer to this question is *always* no.

Obsessional Doubt and Reality

This is even the case for obsessions that are not entirely related to what is around you. For example, you might have an obsession such as ‘I might hit someone’ or ‘I might be a child molester’. There is no real information in the here and now that supports these doubts, not even the reality that is *inside* of you. For example, do you ever *actually* feel angry at someone when you have an obsession like, ‘I might hit someone’? Once again, if it is an obsession, the answer to this question is always no. The obsession is never supported by reality, and this includes your own *inner* reality and common sense.

In one of the cases discussed later, the distinction between obsessing about the possibility of committing an impulsive act and the real impulse to act is traced to the lack of any real identifiable intention or desire. A client who doubts their sexual orientation typically has no desire related to this doubt, only an anxious reflection on its possibility. The genuine sexual arousal all points away from the doubt.

Doubts Go Against Reality

Obsessional doubt never has anything to do with the immediate reality in the here and now. It is what makes your doubt an obsession. It is almost impossible to over-estimate the significance of this fact. It is the basis of all your symptoms.

Creative Exercises

Ask yourself the following questions for your own obsessional doubts the last time they occurred:

1. Was there any information in the here and now to justify the doubt?
2. Did the doubt go beyond objective (inner) sense information?

Reality of Doubt

You may readily agree that your doubts have no basis in reality, yet- you may also wonder why this is so important. After all, even if obsessional doubts are not always supported by ‘immediate’ reality, this does not mean they are impossible. You might feel, for example, that just the fact that you have no direct evidence for the door being unlocked does not mean it might not have been left unlocked. This is certainly true. *All manner*

of things are possible. But this is not the point. The reason why it is important that there is never any direct evidence for an obsession is because it tells us a lot about where the obsession originates from. It tells us it originates from inside of you. And because it has nothing to do with reality in the here and now, it can actually only come from your *imagination*.

Imagination

Keep in mind that we use the term ‘imagination’ here to refer to anything that does not directly relate to reality in the here and now. We know that people with OCD rely a lot on their imagination when coming to conclusions about reality. They seem to very easily come up with possibilities. And these possibilities never ever seem to directly relate to reality; including their own actual inner reality.

For example, in the case of a doubt about not having properly locked the door, this may include ideas like ‘Doors are sometimes accidentally left unlocked’, ‘Perhaps I do not remember correctly locking the door’ or ‘What if the lock broke when I was turning it?’ In the case of an obsession without overt compulsions, it may include ideas like ‘I might offend God’, ‘Did I just swear?’, ‘What if I would spit on the bible?’ or ‘What terrible things could I think of to offend God?’

Imagination and Reason

Of course, we all rely on imagination during reasoning to some extent. It surely would be a strange world to only ever have thoughts about only those things that exist in the here and now. For better or worse, imagining is a very human trait. However, what is particularly peculiar about obsessions is that they are generated on a *purely* imaginary basis. There is no direct evidence for the obsession in the here and now. It originates for a 100% from your imagination, which is exactly what makes your doubt obsessional.

Distinguishing Doubts

The difference between normal and obsessional doubt is that there is always direct evidence in the here and now for the doubt. It does not have to be a whole lot. It can be very little. But as long as there is direct evidence, then the doubt is a normal doubt. In that case, there is always *some* overlap between reality and imagination during reasoning. Such normal doubts occur with specific evidence or information for the doubt. They occur in an appropriate *context*.

For example, you may have plans to spend the next day outside, or you noticed you were running late for an appointment. Also, these doubts are quickly resolved (e.g. check the weather report, or do a simple calculation on how much longer the journey will take).

However, in obsessional doubt, it almost seems like the doubt comes out of nowhere. And it often feels like that too! Because, in reality, there is no justification for the doubt! In fact, reality and imagination are completely disconnected from each other. Imagination does one thing, while reality does the other. Perhaps, then, it is not so surprising that your obsessions so often feel like they are out of your control.

Client Exercise Sheet 5

OCD Is 100% ‘Imaginary’

Perhaps you already intellectually accept the idea that your obsessional doubts originate 100% from the imagination. And with imagination we mean that there is *never* any direct evidence for the obsessional doubt in the here and now. It is what makes your doubt obsessional as opposed to it being a normal doubt.

For example, take the following normal doubts (or questions):

1. Will it rain tomorrow?
2. How long will the journey take?

Such normal questioning occur with specific evidence or information for the doubt. They occur in an appropriate *context*. For example, you may have plans to spend the next day outside, or you noticed you were running late for an appointment. Also, these doubts are quickly resolved (check the weather report, or do a simple calculation on how much longer the journey will take), and from a commonsense point of view you would be convinced all had been done.

Now, take the following obsessional doubts:

1. Did I shut the stove?
2. Did I read that word correctly?

If these doubts are obsessional, they will occur without specific evidence or information. You would check without having direct evidence or information that the stove was still on or that you didn't read the word correctly. The doubt would arise in a situation without having any real indication that the stove is left on. Such doubts are not so easily resolved if you do not realize there is no real evidence in the here and now for the doubts. Even if from a commonsense point of view you would know you have checked enough, the compulsive urge to check would continue.

Being able to determine whether something is a normal or obsessional doubt can make a real difference, especially with respect to your own OCD doubts. First, however, we'll put the idea into practice with some OCD stories other than your own. To do so, try to determine whether the stories written down lead into an obsessional or normal doubt. Remember, if there is no direct link to reality in the here and now, the ensuing doubt is nearly always obsessional.

Creative Exercises

Story 1

A woman checks the front door five times on leaving to go to work and looks back several times to see if her cat has escaped. She also looks and fixates on the door when in her car for a few minutes. The cat has escaped once before in the summer when she was gardening and left the back door open. However, it has never escaped at the moment she leaves for work.

What is the doubt in the story?

Is this doubt obsessional?

Yes

No

If yes, what makes it obsessional (or non-obsessional)? Please be specific in your answer.

Story 2

A pharmacist recounts the number of pills when she gets distracted during her count. She believes the recounting is justified because it's important to be careful when it comes to people's health. Yet, she never has made any mistake with counting pills. However, she did once make a mistake in labelling the bottles.

What is the doubt in the story?

Is this doubt obsessional?

Yes

No

If yes, what makes it obsessional (or non-obsessional)? Please be specific in your answer.

Story 3

A girl is preoccupied that she might unwittingly hit a passerby in the street as she walks along. This has never happened, but she often feels very angry at people. She once knocked someone down in a supermarket when someone was getting in her way all the time. It really feels to her that she could do it with even less provocation the next time.

What is the doubt in the story?

Is this doubt obsessional?

Yes

No

If yes, what makes it obsessional (or non-obsessional)? Please be specific in your answer.

Story 4

A man checks the clothes in his wardrobe for ants, believing ants will lay eggs and eat and destroy them like moths do. His clothes have already been eaten once by moths. He once saw an ant on the towel in the bathroom and another climbing up onto the plant. They are small and could get in and ruin anything like moths.

What is the doubt in the story?

Is this doubt obsessional?

Yes

No

If yes, what makes it obsessional (or non-obsessional)? Please be specific in your answer.

Now, let's turn to your own OCD story. You already have it written out from a previous exercise. Try to determine whether there is anything in your OCD story that has any direct link in reality. Keep in mind that even though some ideas and facts are often *about* reality, this does not mean they have a *direct* link to reality in the here and now.

Did you find any direct justification for your own doubts in the here and now?

- Yes No

If yes, write down below if you found anything in your own story directly relating to reality in the here and now:

Is there anything currently not part of your OCD story that makes you feel your doubt directly relates to the here and now?

Write down below anything you have learned from this exercise or wish to comment on, or that you have questions about.

Client Training Card 5

OCD Is 100% Imaginary

Learning Points

- Obsessional doubt comes from within you. It has nothing to do with reality.
- Obsessional doubt occurs without direct evidence in the here and now.
- The reasoning behind obsessional doubt is 100% based in the imagination.

Daily Exercise

Each time you have an obsessional doubt, ask yourself whether there is or was any direct evidence or information that justifies the doubt. If you think there might be, write it down to bring with you to the next session. Try to compare what the doubt says 'could be' with information coming from your senses, perception and common sense

Client Quiz 5

OCD Is 100% Imaginary

1. The phrase 'OCD is 100% imaginary' means that . . .
 - o you do not perceive correctly.
 - o there is no direct evidence in the here and now.
 - o the doubt is not possible.
 - o none of the above.

2. 'Direct evidence' always refers to . . .
 - o what your physical senses tell you.
 - o what you can actually perceive.
 - o your real bodily reactions.
 - o all of the above.

3. The fact that there is never any direct evidence for the obsessional doubt tells you that obsessional doubt comes from . . .
 - o relying on remote possibilities.
 - o your own subjective reasoning.
 - o relying entirely on your imagination during reasoning.
 - o all of the above.

4. A doubt is obsessional when . . .
 - o it is too intelligent.
 - o it makes you do things you do not want to do.
 - o it occurs without any direct evidence or justification from reality.
 - o it makes you very scared.

5. Relying solely on the imagination during reasoning . . .
 - o is adaptive.
 - o is positive.
 - o takes you away from real perception.
 - o all of the above.

6. Relying solely on the imagination during reasoning about what might be there in reality makes you . . .
 - o phobic.
 - o more profound.
 - o have obsessional doubts.
 - o less intelligent.

Please check your answers by referring to the Quiz Answers Sheet.