

Client Worksheet 3

The Obsessional Story

Feeling Real

Why do doubts (or obsessions) *feel* so real? To answer this question, you will first have to understand why it is that something can feel real to us in the first place. For example, take the activity that you are engaged in right now, the reading of this page. Why does it feel real to you? It feels real not only because of the information that comes through your senses but also; far more importantly, because there is a story attached to this activity with a past, present, and future.

Appealing Stories

Ask yourself, how did you come to read this page? Almost immediately a whole story will start to unfold that reads like a novel. You may see yourself in the past struggling with OCD, how you decided to seek help, your trips to the therapist office, the conversation and questions, the work you did at home, and the hope to overcome your OCD in the future.

Imagine for a moment you would be engaged in reading this page without the above story? How much would remain of your sense of reality in reading this page?

Listening to Your Own Novel

In a way, listening to your own thoughts is like reading a novel. This is not merely coincidental, but is part of how we organize our opinions and feelings about ourselves and how we experience the world around us. While we are engaged with the world around us, a story is unfolding; and we add elements to this story which makes the world around us seem real and convincing, whether you are on your way to the grocery, going to work, conversing with friends or family or obsessing. So in a way, we go through life being storytellers, and the stories we tell ourselves have an important effect on our experience, what we believe in, and how real these beliefs feel to us. In the same manner, obsessional ideas also come about and appear real to us through the stories we tell ourselves. They have a history and a story attached to them, which make them feel very plausible and real.

We're All Storytellers

Aside from all being storytellers, we also reason, and weave our stories in a generally logical and coherent way. So in the story, there are all kinds of seemingly logical and rational reasons behind the obsessional doubt. In fact, you are already quite familiar with the story behind your own obsessions and doubts. After all, in previous sessions, you have identified a lot of thoughts that appear to justify to obsessional doubt. However, all these bits and pieces of information that you have considered so far are really part of a more compelling story – the story you tell yourself when you think about why your doubt might be true. We also sometimes call it the *narrative unit* of your OCD. It is this narrative that makes the OCD feel so real.

Story 1:

I can't go too far from home, or the city that I live in, because I don't know how panicky I might get. I might go really crazy and do something to myself. Who knows what is really wrong with me? One of my family members has schizophrenia, and I might have some serious disturbance also. I could be crazy enough to cut out my tongue. When I'm anxious, I can 'see' myself doing it, using a knife to cut it off. It feels I could actually do it. Then I'll be in the middle of nowhere without help. Then when I'm found I'll be sent off to a psychiatric hospital somewhere that I don't know, and they'll lock me up.

Story 2:

I have to check my stove each time I leave my apartment because I know I am an absent-minded person and that I can forget things. It even happened once that I forgot a pot on my stove; it could have set fire to my apartment. Also, I heard that a firefighter forgot a pot on a stove right at the fire station and it set fire to the station. It is reasonable to think that if a firefighter forgets pots on stoves, it could happen to anybody and especially to those like me who tend to be absent-minded.

Relating to Stories

The degree to which you can relate to these stories probably depends on whether they lead to a similar conclusion as your own story. For example, if you yourself have doubts about contamination, then all manner of reasons that warrant the idea of the contamination story may make more sense to you, while the other story will make less sense to you. Still, in both cases, there is an equally valid story that leads up to these doubts. They are not really different, and one is not necessarily any more or less valid than the other.

Client Training Card 3

The Obsessional Story

Learning Points

- Doubt is experienced as real because there is a credible story behind it.
- Your own OCD story is no more or less valid than any other OCD story.
- The story becomes real when you act on it.
- Change the story and you change the doubt.

Daily Exercise

Invent stories both positive and negative about objects you encounter during the day, and experience how these stories change your experience and attitude towards different situations or objects (e.g., a mug). What if a person you admire handled and washed the mug before? What if you imagine it has been dropped on the floor? What if it belonged to a writer who only used it keep his pens inside? When your OCD doubts appear, stop before plunging into them and recall the story behind them, and how repeating this story convinces you of their validity.

Client Quiz 3

The Obsessional Story

1. Behind every obsession there is...
 - o a core belief.
 - o a story giving credibility to the doubt.
 - o a phobia.
 - o none of the above.

2. The story determines...
 - o the credibility of the obsession.
 - o the truth of the obsession.
 - o how I act in general.
 - o the real facts.

3. An obsession can be created by...
 - o asking someone else to repeat a story.
 - o you creating a story.
 - o suppressing the story.
 - o changing the situation.

4. The story takes the form of a narrative because...
 - o a narrative can be lived in.
 - o a narrative paints a convincing context.
 - o a narrative flows along.
 - o all the above.

5. Individual thoughts can be converted into narrative units by...
 - o placing the words together.
 - o a magic formula.
 - o telling a story connecting them.
 - o saying the thoughts out loud.

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