

Obsessing About Morality: Being Good Without Being Certain

Anxiety Disorders and Mormonism Conference 2018

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Disclosure

- I wrote some books for New Harbinger Publishing Inc. and if you buy them, I will make somewhere between 7 and 12 cents I think.
- It's not impossible that some of the things I say here are unconscious attempts to increase book sales.
- It's not impossible that things I call "unconscious" are really conscious and I am just not being totally honest with myself or with you.

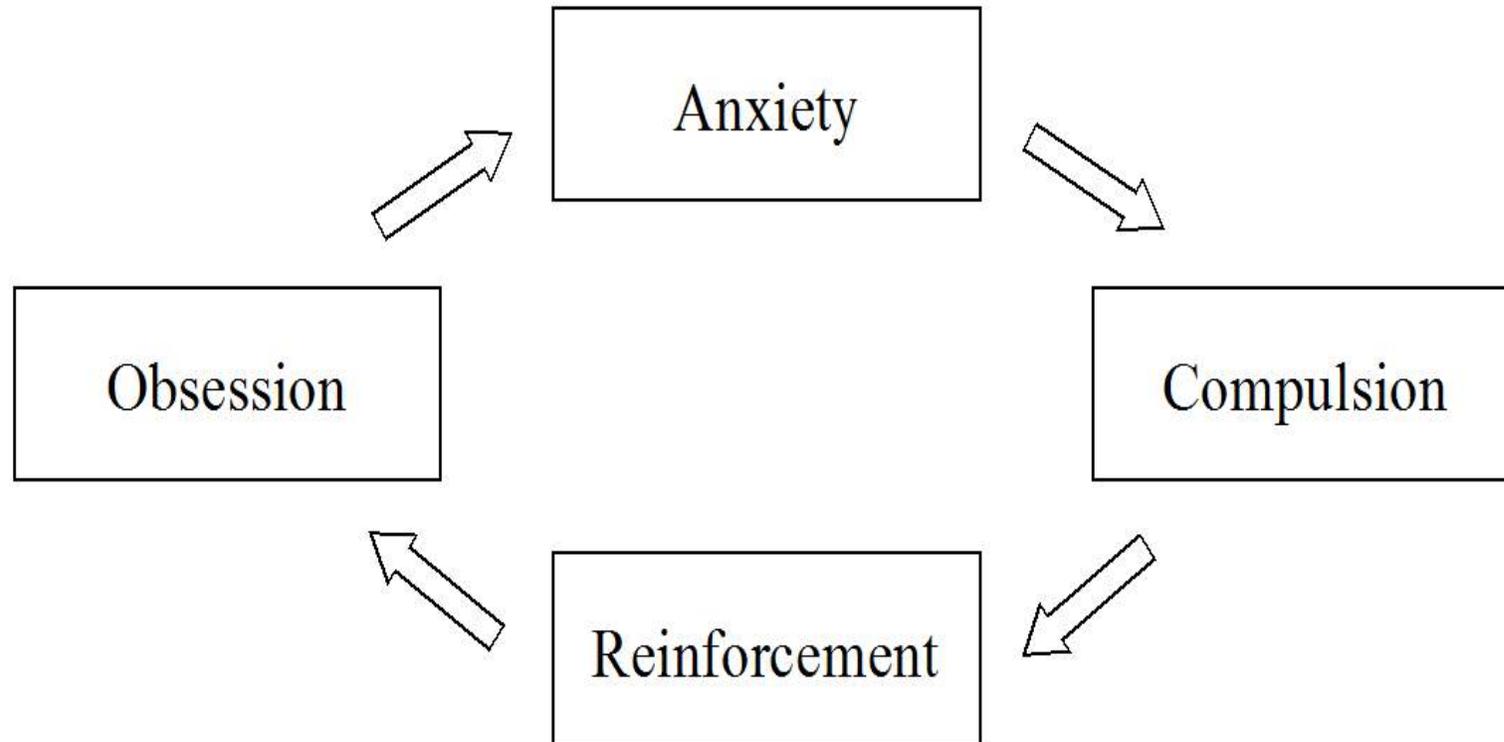
Objectively Speaking

- Define “moral scrupulosity” in OCD
- Understand how CBT and exposure and response prevention (ERP) is used to treat this form of OCD
- Explore ways moral scrupulosity can present with Mormonism
- Take a swing at understanding the role mindfulness and self-compassion can play in overcoming moral scrupulosity

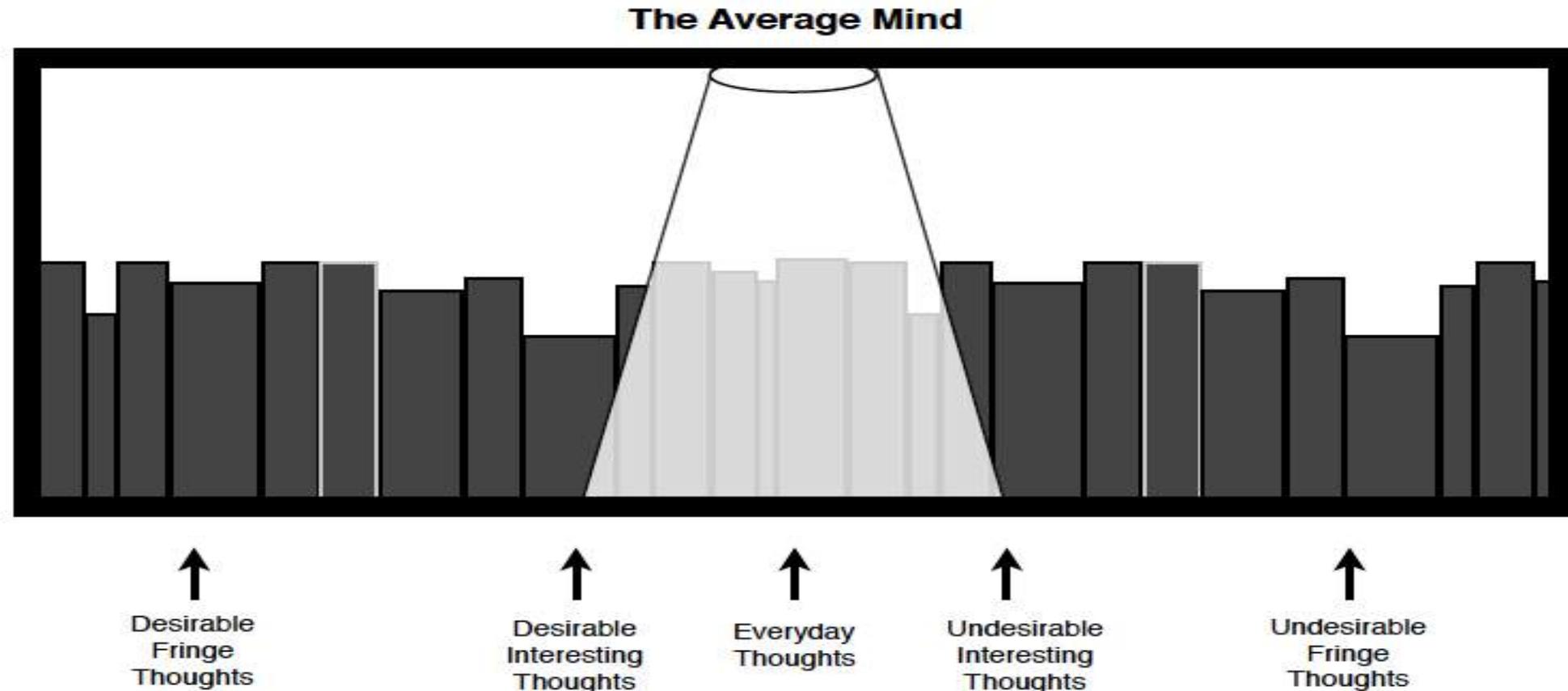
OCD 101

- Common psychiatric condition that affects 2-3% of adult population and 1-2% of children
- Characterized by obsessions (unwanted, intrusive thoughts) and compulsions (physical OR mental rituals aimed at reducing associated discomfort)
- Compulsions reinforce obsessions by sending the message to the brain that relief from discomfort indicates the importance of the unwanted thought and the necessity of the compulsive behavior

The Obsessive-Compulsive Cycle



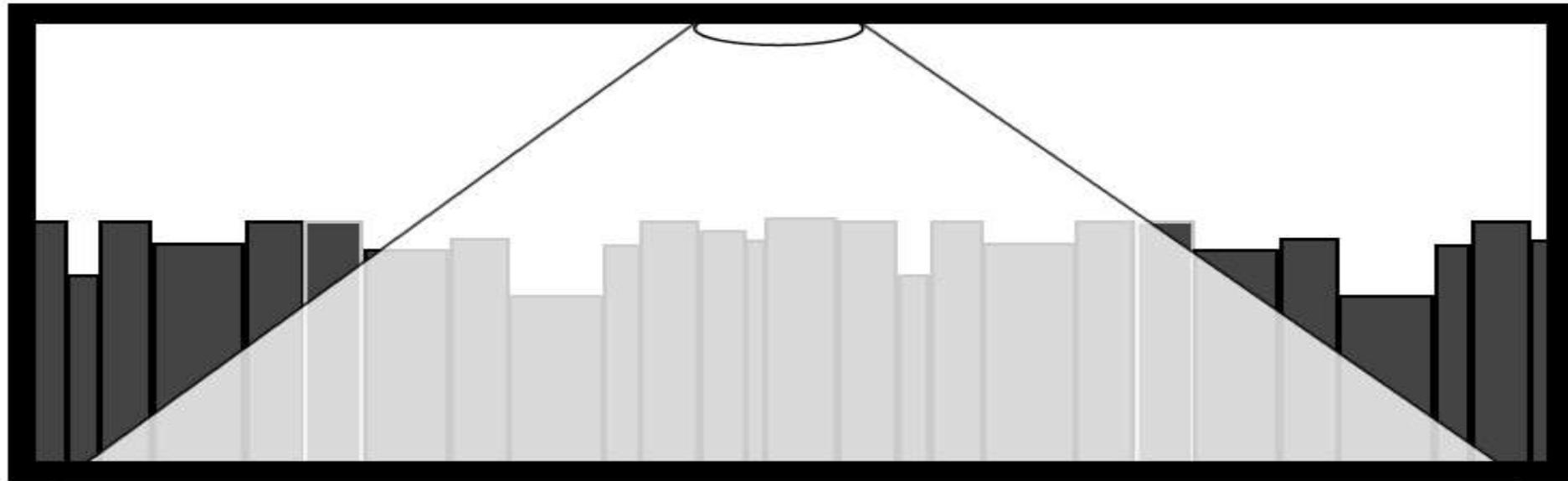
A Way of Thinking About How You Think



(from The Mindfulness Workbook for OCD by Hershfield and Corboy, 2013)

A Way of Thinking About How You Think

The OCD Mind



↑
Desirable
Fringe
Thoughts

↑
Desirable
Interesting
Thoughts

↑
Everyday
Thoughts

↑
Undesirable
Interesting
Thoughts

↑
Undesirable
Fringe
Thoughts

(Hershfield and Corboy, 2013)

What is Moral Scrupulosity in OCD?

- “Excessive concern with right/wrong” (from YBOCS-II, Rasmussen et al., 2006)
 - Worries about always doing “the right thing” ← Why is that in *quotes*?
 - Unfounded worries about lying or cheating ← What does *unfounded* mean??

What is Moral Scrupulosity in OCD?

- Common manifestations
 - Excessive concern with being 100% honest
 - Excessive concern with the idea of being good or of not being bad
 - Excessive concern that a past act was immoral
 - Excessive concern that a thought about an immoral act is not a memory
 - Excessive concern that adultery or some disloyal act took place
 - Excessive concern that a thought could reflect an immoral identity
 - Excessive concern that one has caused someone else to be immoral

What is Moral Scrupulosity in OCD?

- Common compulsions
 - Reassurance seeking about morality
 - Confessing perceived immoral acts or thoughts
 - Mentally reviewing/checking for acts to determine moral integrity
 - Mental rituals (e.g., repeating neutralizing “good” thoughts, ruminating on hypothetical moral scenarios to test responses)
 - Avoidance of morally ambiguous situations
 - Self-punishment to prove moral concern
 - Excessive apologizing for perceived/potential moral failures
 - Washing and checking behaviors connected to moral concerns
 - Excessive donating or other acts of exaggerated altruism/generosity

Pretty Sure I'm Probably Sort of OK

- At the core of any obsession is the misguided demand for certainty
- Certainty about morality is impossible
- Trying to be certain about past intentions is impossible
- Part of being good is being self-confident and taking risks/being willing to cope with being wrong
- Mistakes are not immoral acts, by definition they are failed attempts to do good

Tips for Uncertainty Acceptance

- Accepting uncertainty does not mean accepting 50/50
- There is uncertainty in all things all the time, even the things you believe you are certain about, and that's ok
- You are better at uncertainty tolerance than you think. Your obsession is an exception.
- Assuming the best is allowed and just as scary as accepting the worst.

Cognitive errors in moral scrupulosity

- Black and white, all or nothing, absolutist thinking (Jesus vs Hitler)
- Catastrophizing about moral failures
- Magnifying moral significance
- Discounting the positive/selecting the negative
- Emotional reasoning (e.g. guilty feelings = guilty behaviors)
- Moral perfectionism (should and must statements)

ERP for moral scrupulosity

- Exposure and Response Prevention
 - Gold standard of OCD treatment
 - Gradually confronting fears
 - Concurrently resisting compulsions
- Goals
 - Improve uncertainty tolerance
 - Violate the expectation that uncertainty about morality is intolerable
 - Improve ability to commit to value-based behaviors despite unwanted thoughts/feelings

ERP for moral scrupulosity

- Therapist's Guidelines
 - Work within client's moral framework, not violate it
 - Identify the lines not to be crossed
 - Do exposure to walking near the line without checking
 - Risk the potential that line could or even has been stepped on or crossed
 - Only do what therapist is willing to do
- OCD Sufferer's Guidelines
 - No compulsions (including self-reassurance)
 - No intentional violations of moral or religious code (but bending rules/taking risks for mental health may be prioritizing one morality over another)
 - No testing/certainty-seeking

ERP for moral scrupulosity

- Hierarchy development
 - Inventory avoidance
 - Reduce accommodation
 - Explore both mental and physical moral exposures
 - Start as small as necessary (e.g. exposure to a trigger word without compulsions)

ERP for moral scrupulosity

- Imaginal exposures
 - Scripts articulating that uncertainty will be accepted about morality
 - I may never know if I committed an immoral act and am going to move forward without knowing
 - Scripts describing the outcome of moral failures
 - I may have been dishonest in my behavior and this could lead to someone being harmed by....
 - Scripts that are in and of themselves moral exposures
 - I hope Jon's kid gets the flu and dies...

moral scrupulosity alongside other obsessions

- Contamination
 - It would be wrong to touch this with dirty hands
- Checking
 - It would be wrong to risk the door being unlocked, etc.
- Harm
 - It would be wrong to be careless in a way that could lead to harm (leaving a sharp object exposed = involuntary manslaughter)
- Sexual obsessions
 - It would be wrong to deceive others about my attractions
- Relationship obsessions
 - It would be wrong to let my partner stay in a relationship with someone who has my thoughts
- Religious scrupulosity
 - It would be wrong to be flexible with religious doctrine on moral issues

Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

- Mindfulness – the ability to observe thoughts and feelings as they are in the present moment without judgment
 - Noting what IS instead of being distracted by what COULD BE
 - Viewing uncertainty, doubt, and related discomfort as objects of attention, not mandates to change behavior (note: challenge inherent in belief that anxiety is a failure of faith)
 - Being honest to the present experience instead of getting caught up in content (e.g. I am having thoughts about morality vs I am an immoral thinker)

Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion
 - Empathy plus the desire to ease suffering as applied inward
 - Applying Mormon emphasis on kindness, generosity and health to the self
 - Speaking to oneself as you would to someone you loved
- Three core elements (see *Self-Compassion* by Neff, 2011)
 - Mindfulness
 - Common Humanity
 - Self-kindness

OCD and Mormon Morality (or Mormality™)

- Denying the Holy Ghost
 - Knowing Jesus and then rejecting this knowledge
 - No Mormon has ever been accused of this
 - OCD: How do I know for certain I have not done this?
- Murder (against it)
 - Harm OCD obsessions
- Sexual concerns
 - Sex before marriage
 - Sexual fidelity
 - Sexual orientation
 - The control of sexual urges
- Words of Wisdom
 - Dietary restrictions
 - Avoidance of intoxicants
 - Taking care of physical health

OCD and Mormon Morality (or Mormality™)

- Moral necessities
 - Charity/generosity
 - Tithing to the Church, sacrifice
- Confessing
 - Required for access to the Holy Temple
 - Great material for OCD
 - All of the above moral tests and...
 - A vow of honesty about honesty

Concerns I have heard...

- Fear that an item confessed in their interview was omitted or inaccurately described
- Obsessive concern about having been imperfectly polite or having engaged in gossip
- Obsessive concern that anxiety is evidence of moral or religious failure
- Shame associated with doubt about religious rules
- Fear of being too forgiving or tolerant of one's past transgressions or of another's

ERP Exercises to try today?

- Tell someone you “know” something you’re only pretty sure about
- Take a freebie from an exhibit table and walk away before hearing the pitch
- Come back later and take another one
- Sign up for a mailing list with illegible handwriting
- Do not apologize for doing any of these exercises.
- email me with the subject “I KNOW WHAT YOU DID AT ADAM” and nothing in the actual email – jon@ocdbaltimore.com