

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 in the metro or 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 every *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 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.