JK’s Story

OCD:  A small acronym, with a ridiculously large amount of power.

OCD entered my life in my childhood. I would engage in checking rituals:  I'd check something, double check it, then check it again, multiple times.  Likewise were my ruminating habits:  I'd think through an event or conversation I had; replay the order of events in my mind; dwell on the words I used in a discussion; then examine the details of my thought process all over again.  Hoping, wishing, pondering that if I checked or ruminated enough, I would finally achieve that inner satisfaction that everything I had done or said was "just right".

The problem was, however, that these checking and ruminating compulsions I did only led to more doubt.  That "just right" feeling, in reality, did not exist.  There was sometimes a temporary reprieve of the fears, the doubts, the uncertainties.  Temporary.  The thoughts would always return:  stronger and more intense than they were originally.

I met with numerous therapists over the years.  Talk therapy was helpful, but not for my OCD.  One therapist would suggest that I check something "just once".  Another would recommend that I "just stop it". These were NOT solutions!

Exposure Response Prevention was not a tool that these professionals had in their briefcases.  I remember a session where a psychologist told me that she just couldn't help me.  Clearly, I had not yet met an OCD specialist.

By the time I completed college, my checking and ruminating compulsions were consuming many hours of each day.  I continued to search for another therapist who would have some answers for me. The Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, now known as the International OCD Foundation, was the start of my path to recovery. I went through the intensive treatment program with Jim Sterner at The Gateway Institute.  Of all the therapists I had met with over the years, Jim was the only one who understood every one of my compulsions.  Nothing surprised him. The initial feeling of relief I felt on that very first appointment is something I will always treasure and never forget.

Through my exposure response prevention homework, which I did consistently on a daily basis, I began to learn the tools for living with OCD. By this time, I had been married for 10 years and had two children.  As one can imagine, marriage combined with OCD and raising children is a very complex, and frustrating, puzzle. The challenges of keeping up with my obsessions and compulsions, while maintaining a marriage and parenting my kids, was unbearable at times.

Thankfully, I was able to care for my children in a loving and safe manner while suffering internally and mentally on an indescribable level.  The fear of losing my children due to being labeled an "unfit mother" was all-consuming.  As I began my intensive treatment program with Jim, I created a hierarchy, listing every single one of my compulsions.  I rated each compulsion on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the strongest, most intense, unavoidable rituals for me at that point.

One by one, I tracked my triggers and the corresponding exposures I did as my daily homework.  The OCD fought hard against me as I began my uphill climb toward the path of freedom from the grip of OCD.  Jim taught me the tools to utilize to combat the unrelenting pull of the intrusive thoughts, the compulsions.  As I continued to experience my greatest fear that my kids would be taken away from me because I would be deemed an "unfit mother" due to my battle with OCD, I began to accept that fear.  What that looks like is something like this:  I had to focus on the reality that "I may actually have my kids taken away from me".  I may lose the privilege of raising these two miracles who mean everything to me.  Then what?  I had to get to the place of genuine acceptance:  someone else would have the joy of raising my kids.  I would lose that opportunity, that privilege, that blessing forever.  I would be stuck in the endless cycle of intrusive thoughts and fears.

As I welcomed these realities, initially the anxiety increased to what I thought was a never-ending level of extremes.  Then, gradually, I began to experience something incredible:  the fear of losing my role as "mom" started to diminish.  Definitely not all at once, but little by little.  This is the point where I began to habituate to the anxiety.

I consistently completed my exposure assignments, day by day.  As a result, each day, I grew stronger.  My OCD got weaker as I started to become the master over it. This is the reward of perseverance; of pursuing the freedom; of trusting Jim's guidance, expertise and wisdom.

As I felt the hint of power over my compulsions, that motivated me to stick with my exposure homework, not skipping a day.  In fact, I learned how to be on the offensive with my OCD treatment:  I would look for opportunities to welcome the intrusive thoughts and fears.  Then I would do exposures I assigned to myself.  I began to act as my own therapist.  This is when my strength and confidence with the ERP treatment really started to soar.

The taste of freedom from being trapped in the OCD cycle of fear, compulsion, back to fear, on to another compulsion, and so on, was taking root in my core behaviors.  I no longer lived with the incessant urge to give in to the compulsions.

Following the intensive program, I joined an OCD support group as a source of relapse prevention.  Our facilitator, Chris, was the strong, driving force that kept me committed to the group and to doing the exposures that keep me on track to this day.  The accountability of being in a weekly group of mentors was one of the foundations that kept me committed to making ERP a permanent part of my life.  The tools I've learned are in the mental toolbox that is with me 24/7.  The intrusive thoughts may still come from time to time, but now I have the tools to utilize to not get drawn into the trap of OCD.

There is simply too much life to live to give my energy away to the world of OCD.  There are too many others who continue to suffer from this condition, and I must maintain my strength so I can continue to lead others on this path of freedom from compulsive behavior.

There is life beyond OCD, and I'm so thankful I trusted the treatment process and Jim's direction, in order to achieve true freedom from obsessions and compulsions.  The gateway to this freedom is unlocked by doing the smart, committed work of ERP, along with welcoming the support of others.

~JK