

Kendall's Story

I knew nothing about OCD during my grade school years. So when I started experiencing unusual behavior patterns, my first instinct was to keep quiet. I was embarrassed and didn't want family or friends to know anything was wrong. It wasn't until 80's talk show host Phil Donahue devoted a program to OCD that I realized what my problem was. Fortunately for me, my OCD was not severe, and the symptoms diminished by high school. Interestingly, some of the characteristics resurfaced in my 30's and still exist today.

Turns out, my personal experience would be helpful decades later when my son was diagnosed with OCD. He, like me, was in grade school when symptoms first started: fear of food being contaminated, fear of mixing food, fear of washing/bathing, excessive hand washing, fear of having AIDS (prompted by a Boy Scout event involving mixing blood), Then, fear of homosexuality, and fear of anything relating to the devil. It also took him about 10 minutes to walk through a door because the thoughts had to be 'just right'. His symptoms and subsequent behavior (like not brushing his teeth for days) drove me insane. I scheduled meetings with different psychiatrists and psychologists, but they produced little change. As the years went on, my relationship with my son became more and more challenging. Everything we had tried had failed, even an effort to get him into the Navy. He lacked motivation, and I wanted him to grow up. Thankfully his father, who lives out of the area, took him in for a few months. A much-needed 'cooling off' period for mother and son.

I was desperate for answers and used my free time researching OCD treatments. This is how I found Jim Sterner at the Gateway Institute. Jim is a nationally known expert on OCD and runs a three-week program focused on intense exposure therapy. My son went through the program part time with wonderful results. Many of his compulsions had diminished. But over the months that followed he began taking his medication on and off and not doing a lot of the exposures that he was supposed to.

A huge positive resulting from meeting Jim was learning about the OCD support group that meets one night a week in Jim's office. It is only for those affected with OCD and is led by Chris. Chris, now in his 30s, has overcome severe OCD from his teenage years. His knowledge and experience garners respect among the group members. He has been OCD free for many years. If anyone in the group tried to pull a fast one on Chris, he knew how to spot it. He would not let anyone get away with not doing their exposures because if they didn't do their homework they would have to do it in class. One time he made my son go into the bathroom and wash his hair and body and brush

his teeth while everyone waited. They were so annoyed with him. Here he was, a grown man having poor hygiene, and of course I thought it reflected badly on me as a mother.

It didn't matter that I was proactive for a long time about nipping this in the bud, but he really didn't seem like he wanted to get better. I was so frustrated and losing my patience all the time. I even made him live in his car for a few days. A couple months later I kicked him out of the house and found him a place to live with roommates because I just didn't want to see his OCD or know about it. I felt like I had done everything I could to help him but if he didn't want to help himself then there was nothing I could do. Chris had to kick him out of group for a while. He lost his job so he had to move back in with me for a short time. Suddenly, when he turned 25 it seem like he finally got it. I'm not sure why to be honest. Maybe he was just sick and tired of this.

So now he's been living on his own for almost a year, renting a room, holding down a job, taking his meds pretty regularly, and is going back to school in the fall. Chris let him back in the group, and he's going to the weekly meetings. Trust me, things are far from perfect. I know his brain has to grow from a 15 year old to a 25-year-old from wasting so much time doing rituals and obsessions, but I remain positive about his future. I know eventually he'll get there. I am also so thankful that he's a really sweet and caring individual, and we have a great relationship. It seems every day we get closer to that end of the tunnel.

Kendall