

My Treatment Story

By Megan

When I was in second grade, we were given a presentation on the spread of germs in order to prevent the spread of illness around my elementary school. My teacher explained how things like bathroom faucets and door handles could carry germs, and how we should always wash our hands after touching public objects like these. It was a good lesson for my fellow classmates, but later in life would seem like a criminal sentence to me.

My brain latched onto that lesson in ways it didn't for the other kids in my class. I found myself constantly washing my hands, and felt suspicious of everyone and whether or not they were clean. This continued into third grade, and by now some of my friends began to notice my strange habits regarding cleanliness. My best friend at the time asked me why I would open doors with my sleeve or shirttail, or why I tucked my hair behind my ears with my pinkies (both out of fear that something was unclean). I shrugged it off, too embarrassed to come up with an excuse. I didn't want to or know how to explain my intense distress when my hands or prized possessions felt dirty. I just knew that my emotions calmed down when I washed my hands, even if my skin began to protest the constant washing.

Purell and soap became two of my favorite things in the world. I didn't realize just how much I loved these two things until I was reminiscing with a friend about our childhood and she recalled an instance in which I had enlisted her help in washing all of stuffed animals individually in hand sanitizer for the entirety of our playdate, going through three travel-size bottles in the span of two hours. We laughed about it, but I internally cringed when I thought about all the time I had wasted in fruitless attempts to appease the insatiable, power-hungry demon in my brain.

At age ten, I would learn that this demon had a name, and was called OCD. At the time, this seemed like the worst news I could've possibly received. All I knew about OCD was what I had seen on television, which was unflattering, to say the least. Shows like *Glee* and *Monk* portrayed the disorder as something of a laughingstock, constantly getting the character afflicted with the disorder into uncomfortable situations or an utter mess for comedy's sake. I didn't want to be labelled a 'freak' or be associated with the anxious, paranoid stereotypes on TV. I begged my parents not to send me to therapy, trying desperately to convince them that there was nothing wrong with my lifestyle and that I didn't need to be fixed. But at this point in time, I was taking two hour showers everyday and refused to let anyone touch anything from school, fearing that the building and all things relating to it were 'contaminated', as my therapist would later say.

I protested therapy at every opportunity. I refused to do the exercises, I mocked the treatment I was receiving, and hated attending sessions with every fiber of my being. After several months of this, I switched therapists, and met the doctor who wasn't willing to put up with my crap. She made me do my exercises in front of her to ensure I was actually

doing them, and implored my mother to make sure I did them at home. With no other choice, I started doing my challenges. I still protested and cried and threw temper tantrums and bemoaned my miserable existence, but I did them. And the out-of-control voice in my head slowly got quieter and quieter, until I barely had to block it out at all. At the beginning of sixth grade, not a moment of my day wasn't taken up by OCD in some form. By the end of the year, I had managed to regain my freedom from my disorder slowly but surely, until finally it seemed completely gone.

OCD seemed to be gone entirely, up until 2015. The beginning of high school was a rough time for me, and in the midst of my transition, OCD found the perfect way to attack. It had slowly but surely taken over my life again, and I found myself in need of more help. I joined a group therapy for people with OCD. I attended conferences. I did an intensive therapy program over the summer. And I found myself improving. What had once seemed a futile, hopeless pursuit for a normal life was now an achievable goal. That was the summer of 2017, and I now find myself in a much better place than I've ever been before. It took months, *years* of hard work, but I can go to school. I can talk to friends. I can open doors for people and shake hands. I can live my life without feeling like OCD's pawn. And as I gained back control over my life, I learned that OCD is not a death sentence. Being diagnosed with OCD doesn't mean that your life is over. It doesn't mean that you'll never be normal or hold down a job or graduate school. It means a lot of struggling and a lot of extra steps, but OCD is treatable. The therapy works, and I'm living proof of that.

Though I still struggle with my compulsions and intrusive thoughts and getting out of bed in the morning, I'm in so much of a better place than I was two years ago. And now I plan to use the story of my successes and struggles to inspire other people coping with OCD, and to hopefully help people get the treatment they need. I couldn't have gotten to the place I am today without the help of my therapists, my group, my family and friends, but most of all, I couldn't have gotten here without me. At the end of the day, I was the one who had to tell OCD to take a hike and push back on the compulsions. I was the one who had to resist the urge to wash my hands for hours at a time, no matter how much my brain was screaming at me. I was the one who finished the intensive and gained back the control OCD had over me. And now I can comfortably answer the question I asked myself all those years ago when I first started treatment: Is this all worth it?

And I can now say with 100% certainty: Yes. Yes it is.