The Reality of OCD: A Counsellor's Perspective

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To mark OCD Awareness Week, we spoke to BACP's Sally Ingram Msc, an expert in counselling for OCD, about the condition and the support that is available.

A recent survey answered by 129 BACP members revealed that 86% currently see a client with OCD, while 50% of 112 respondents said they have seen an increase in clients seeking help for the anxiety disorder in recent years, highlighting the prevalence of the condition.

Sally said: “OCD is a debilitating mental health condition, leaving the person suffering from it with a strong desire to dissipate anxious thoughts and images by engaging in physical and/or mental compulsions.”

”I think of it as 'Obsessive Compulsive Distress' - a disorder implies that the person is faulty or broken and they're not.”

“What they have is a natural inbuilt mechanism to make things better, which all human beings have – theirs [the person with OCD] is just disproportionate and highly exaggerated.”

Sally added that the condition is often referred to as the 'doubting disease' because of its ability to cause doubt and confusion in the mind of someone with the condition.

“Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the person suffering with OCD doubts themselves, doubts that things are safe, or that things are OK.“

“It puts a person in a position where they doubt the simplest things of themselves, so people often fear they've inadvertently harmed somebody, or they committed a serious crime, and they simply can't be sure they have not.”

Sally went on to explain how talking therapies can be an effective method for treating OCD.

“The counselling response of choice, which is evidence-based, is Exposure and Response Prevention, where we very gently, in collaboration with the client, expose them to the things they fear in an appropriate way and stay with them until the anxiety dips.

“We prevent them from engaging in their safety response, whether that be counting, checking the door is locked, and so forth.

“What we're trying to do with Exposure and Response Prevention is create a new neurological pathway – to show there's an alternative way of thinking, along with helping the client to experience an anxiety dip naturally,” she added.

Several BACP members also commented through our survey on the effectiveness of counselling for OCD.

“I find that clients with OCD, or OC personality traits, benefit from counselling as they have an opportunity to talk about their difficulties without having to experience the shame that these problems are often associated with. This gives the client the space to work out why they have these behaviours. And with that understanding they are able to make informed choices about continuing to give in to these urges or not.”

“Using CBT is really helpful in learning to manage the anxiety which is behind the OCD. Exploring the reasons for OCD, can be helpful in helping a client to understand why they are like this.
Psycho-education about stress and anxiety is very normalising for a client and can help to stop the cycle of anxiety.”

(For further comments from BACP members go to the BACP Media Centre.)

Therapy can be accessed privately, or through local charities and voluntary organisations, as well as for free through your GP. BACP's public website, It's Good To Talk, features a 'Find a Therapist' directory where you can locate private counsellors in your area.

For more information on OCD, visit OCD-UK's website.

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