

Narrator: Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder that affects about one percent of the population. The symptoms of this disorder include recurrent and persistent thoughts, repetitive, often ritualistic behaviors, and the presence of marked anxiety surrounding these thoughts and actions. Although most people experience some obsessions and compulsions, these behaviors are considered abnormal only when they cannot be controlled, and when they significantly reduce the quality of a person's life.

Narrator: Laura and Marna are long-time friends who have both suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder since adolescence. Although both women live relatively normal lives, their disorder interferes in significant ways. For example, simple actions such as filing an important paper can set off a spiral of compulsive behaviors. These behaviors can become highly ritualized and can occupy an entire day.

Marna: When I was in school, I would walk down the halls and I would be looking at other people and I thought, they're not—they don't have this in their brain. They're not—I mean, it was just—it's—they weren't obsessing. I was acutely aware—

Laura: Me, too.

Marna: That I was, um—

Laura: Different.

Marna: Yeah, different and agonizing and I wanted, I wanted to be like them for a minute, to have some relief.

Laura: I just thought I was completely weird. And in, in high school, I would spend, uh, um, 45 minutes putting on mascara and, like, each little lash, "Why am I doing this?" I would say to myself. "This is weird. None of my other friends take this long to put on mascara." I have two major OCD things. Um, and, the major one would be like, checking either paperwork, clothing tags or zippers. The other one—that I hate the most, that really, you know, brings shame, you know, inside of me or whatever—is the picking of the scabs. The obsessively picking and repicking and repicking scabs. That's the most painful for me. On a bad day with my OCD, I wouldn't be able to figure out what to wear, would be running around and then, um, I'd be sw—sweating a lot because I'd be getting nervous because I'm running late and then I wouldn't be able to find the particular paperwork that I needed to take

to an important meeting that day. Because I, what I'll do, I'll, I'll put it away and then, uh, the urge—and you can feel it, it's almost like a, a ...

Marna: Yeah.

Laura: ... a surge that you have to ... We've actually never talked about this, this particular aspect, but it's like a surge, and oh, I've got to check, I've got to see. Is, is that other insurance paper behind there? And what's behind that? And, and what's behind that? And what's in the other little, you know how dividers in a, like a, you know, portable file kind of thing. And so I just end up checking all of it. And, you know, um, in my worst days, several years back, I'd would check, uh, I'd have to cut out the tags of all my clothes because I'll check. Oh, made in Korea. Oh, and, and, it's a large. And, um, I know brand names for zippers because I, um. Did I tell you about the zipper one?

Marna: Yeah. You know, all the tags ...

Laura: Yalon, Y A L O N, the Yalon company. Um, so, things like that. Um, OK, but I, what I would do is, like, I'd have to feel—see, right now I'm wanting to, like, feel the ledge—I'd have to, like, feel it and go OK, there's a ledge. Where's the ledge? There's a ledge. And this is all like, in my mind kind of thing. And, and the one that's in my pillow, I would lift it up and down and up and down and up and down.

Narrator: People with obsessive-compulsive disorder often become obsessed by unpleasant or inappropriate thoughts, as you will see in this segment, for example. They might think about harming someone they love and when they are unable to purge this idea from their mind, they become highly distressed. Furthermore, they might feel driven to perform a ritualistic act, such as hand washing or counting, in order to avert some perceived threat. As is typical of people with OCD, both Laura and Marna are keenly aware that their obsessions are irrational and counterproductive. Still, they have great difficulty controlling their obsessive thoughts and behaviors.

Marna: On a bad day—uh, on my worst, one of my worst days—I was up all night, so, seven or eight hours, trying to figure out what to wear. And I was aware that this was happening and it, it was frustrating, it was, um, it was sad and I didn't know how I was going to get out of that, but I had, I had to figure it out, so ... But that's seven or eight hours, and then I was exhausted, and I had to go to school. So—and I knew that it was going to affect my whole next day.

But what do you do? I mean, I, I just couldn't, couldn't figure it out, so ... So that's, that's seven or eight hours ruminating on that, and you had something ...

Laura: Yeah, maybe it wasn't quite seven or eight hours, but it was, it, it was so—I think, it, you know, one night, it was, um, oh about 10 or so, and I just felt compelled to look at all the tags on my shirts and I'm sitting there looking. And I kept saying to myself, "Go to bed, Laura. Go to bed." And instead I just would check the tags and I finally, maybe about 2:30 or so—so, like four and a half, five hours later—I just, I was like "Ugh, must go to bed" and finally made it. But I was so made at myself, and then so, it's, it's embarrassing. And I think, you know, normal people don't do this, you know?

Marna: I try not to go grocery shopping anymore. I avoid it at all costs. OK, so I go—I'm going to the produce aisle and I'm getting some celery and which bunch do you, do you take? And, um, if there are people around, then it creates more anxiety, so I'm, I'm carefully—I'm looking at each bunch and I know, you know, OK, that one's not gonna do it and, um, so I have to—I might pick it up. I might find a bunch that I like, pick it up put it in the grocery cart and walk down. And I know, that's not the one that I want. So I'll just kind of strategically, OK, as soon as that customer goes down to the next aisle, I'll go back and get that other bunch that I thought "Yeah, that's the better bunch." Sometimes, I just have this compelling urge to step on the gas and just, just go. And, um, then, if a pedestrian is crossing ... If a pedestrian is crossing the street, and I will just have this compelling urge to run them over. And, um, I mean I've never done that, and I learned that if you get into a situation like that you can just put the car in neutral, and that will help. And I have done that, um, at times, since I just don't want to deal with, uh, with the urge and the, the fear of actually running them over. Um, I've been walking down the street with a friend and felt the urge to just push him into traffic and so, uh, I thought, you know, let's just go over on the other block—walk, walk down the other street. So, and, um, I, I don't think that I would ever do it, but I have the thought never-the-less and it's disturbing.

Narrator: During the 1990s, researchers made great strides in developing treatments for people with OCD. Today, a combination of behavior therapy and medications can reduce obsessive compulsive symptoms in nearly 60 percent of those who suffer from this condition. In the final segment, Laura and Marna discuss some of the techniques that they have learned in therapy, which help them cope with their

OCD. They also discuss their hope for a future, when they can be free from both obsessions and compulsions.

Marna: I get relief by stitching, doing cross stitch, and it's amazing, the transformation. I just pick up the needle and, uh, it's as if my bane—my brain is being bathed with relief. It's driven by the, the, uh, the need to want it to look good, but it's very different. It's not like straightening dishes or something. This is—this has a whole, whole other—I get calm and peaceful and ...

Laura: Usually, if I wait, after about 15, 20 minutes, especially like half hour, the urge is either gone ...

Marna: It passes.

Laura: ... or it's much less. I mean, literally in the last couple weeks—I hope and pray that I'm finally conquering this after like eight years. Because I, I didn't start out doing that. I started out ...

Marna: Now she has told me at least four times that she's conquered this ...

Laura: Stop it.

Marna: ... you know, over the past eight years. "This is it. I've stopped the picking."

Laura: OK, but this is really it. It's like an addiction. It's like, um— isn't it similar to like a, like a alcohol addiction?

Marna: Absolutely.

Laura: People like "I am stopping drinking. I am not going to have another drink." And then the next day they go out and have a beer, so, you know. But really, this is it.

Marna: Okay, we'll see.

Laura: All right.

Marna: Um, anyway, there is, you know—we're in a good mood today. But the—there are aspects to this that, that are so sad and so depressing. It doesn't stop on a bad day. You go from one thing to the next. And, and, while you're doing this first thing, I'm aware that I'm

gonna have to deal with this next thing as soon as I can resolve this. So, um, because the dealing with—dealing with life, it just, it's one thing after another.