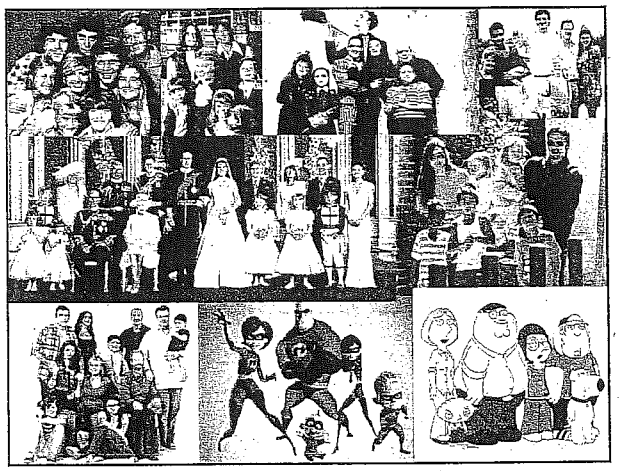


We're All in This Together: Family Treatment for OCD

Perrie Merlin, LICSW and Thea Cawley, LICSW
OCD Institute, McLean Hospital
Belmont, MA

Why is family treatment so important

- Strengthens alliances
- Augments individual treatment
- Educates family about OCD
- Provides a forum for family members to share their experience of OCD
- Helps family members to become observers of the process rather than participants
- Fosters independence for the OCD sufferer

What happens to the OCD Family?

"Everyone in the family becomes an accomplice to the OCD"

~Herbert Gravitz, *OCD New Help for the Family*

What happens to the OCD Family?

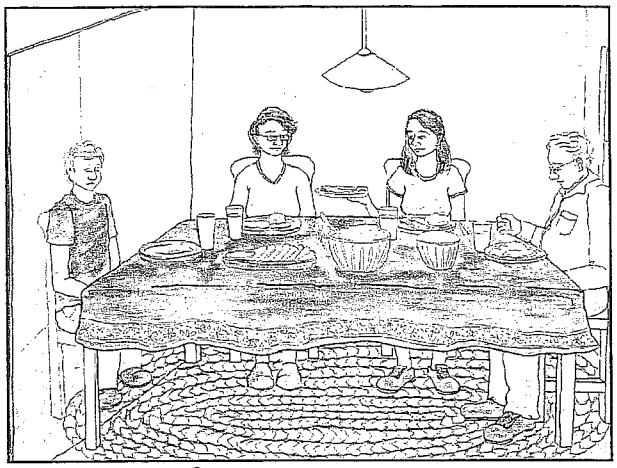
The OCD becomes the most important circumstance to the family

New rules begin to develop that help adapt to the chaos such as....

- Don't challenge
- Don't state the obvious
- Don't trigger the OCD sufferer

This leads to a rigid atmosphere that restricts growth

Herb Gravitz, *OCD New Help for the Family*



Glass wall

What happens to the OCD Family?

The Family Experiences...

- Chronic Tension
- Loss
- Burn Out

What happens to the OCD family?

Chronic Tension

Crisis oriented atmosphere

Walking on eggshells

Days are unpredictable

Illogical behavior becomes normal

What happens to the OCD family?

Loss

Family members lose...

- Normal relationships with one another
- Social life
- Personal time
- Control
- Intimacy

over dependent on parent

What happens to the OCD family?

Burn Out

Family members are exhausted from coping with OCD

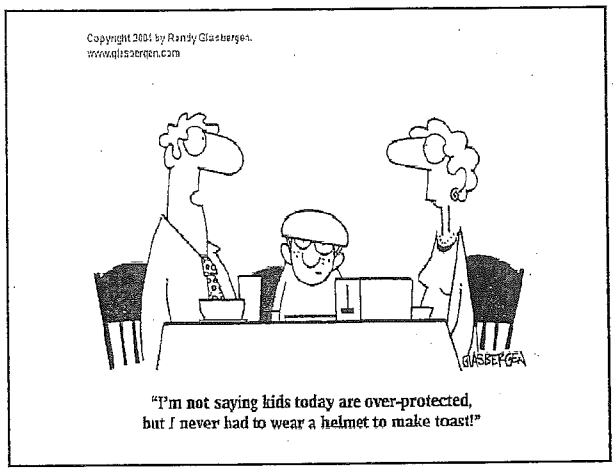
The home environment feels:

- Helpless
- Confusing
- Hostile
- Angry
- Fearful
- Fraught with guilt
- Worried

Doubt that anything will ever change

"There are many ways a person can change. I've had good results with cocoon therapy."

ASSESSEMENT



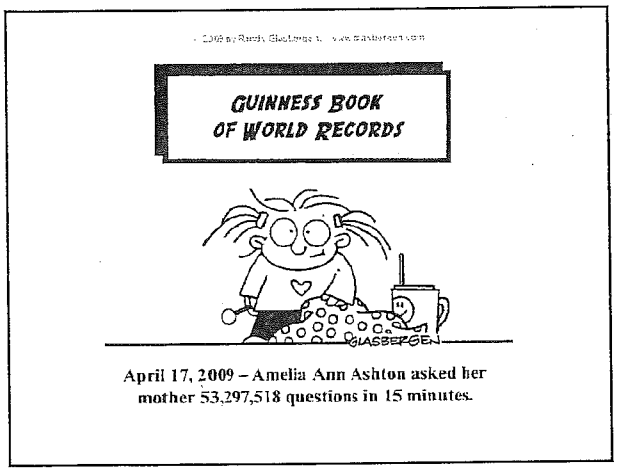
ASSESSEMENT

Why seek treatment now?

Are the symptoms interfering with the family system functioning?

Assess family function at "baseline" prior to OCD interference
- Define the ***sweet spot***
  - What did it look like before OCD interference?

What are the specific behaviors interfering with family function now



ASSESSEMENT

Why seek treatment now?

Identify OCD Symptoms

Are there co-morbid symptoms/disorders?
- Create a hierarchy of symptoms needing to be addressed.
  REMEMBER: You cannot treat everything! Especially at one time!!

- You may have to refer them for other treatment before OCD treatment is possible
  - Actively abusing alcohol will interfere with the ability to do effective ERP

  Family may have to work on the substance abuse first

ASSESSEMENT

Family as a Living Organism

Developmental Stage: the Organism is Stuck
- Adult child living at home with a parent needing to be nearby 24x7

Next stage: Organism needs to move!
- Adult needs to individuate
- Parents need to resume couple intimacy
- Family needs to resume having parents involved with other family life

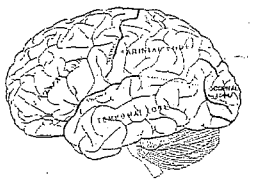
Identify who will come in for treatment
- Can you have family therapy without the person with OCD?

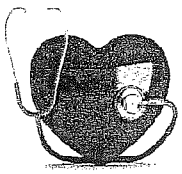
TREATMENT & EDUCATING THE FAMILY

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Illness vs. Person

The brain is an organ just like the kidney, liver, and heart





TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Cognitive and Behavioral Patterns Families Often Observe/Experience

Tendency to procrastinate /avoid
Problems with time management
Articulates but doesn't follow through
Control issues
Anger management issues
Disregard for others' personal boundaries
Lack of socially acceptable behavior
Circular arguments and discussions
- The "Yeah but..." and "What if..."

Repetitive theme of "you don't know what it's like to have OCD"

"You want me to clean my room.
What's my budget for the project?"

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Begin to Establish Treatment Goals

Where do they want to start?

Can be as simple as "All meals will be at dinner table"

Make goals reasonable, inline with societal expectations

Example:

Their bedroom – It looks like a bomb exploded. It is reasonable to expect room to not be a fire hazard or the local bug/mouse hang-out.

Too much stuff? It is reasonable to keep amount of belongings in the room to a minimum and increase only as they are able to maintain. Remember! Landlords come in/out of apartments they own. It is not reasonable for your family member to refuse you access to any particular room

"Dear Andy — How are you? Your mother and I are fine. We both miss you and hope you are doing well. We look forward to seeing you again the next time your computer crashes and you come downstairs for something to eat. Love, Mom and Dad."

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

What are accommodation behaviors and why don't they work?

It is a natural instinct to want to rescue a loved one from their pain

When the loved one has OCD what comes naturally actually reinforces the OCD symptoms

Some call it enabling. We call it accommodation.

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

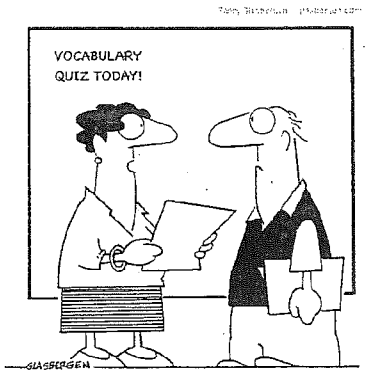
Accommodation Behaviors

- Logic and reasoning
  - OCD does not understand logic
- Reassurance
  - By providing reassurance to the OCD sufferer, you are giving life to the OCD
- Avoidance
  - By avoiding feared consequences, the person is missing an opportunity to habituate
- Participation and Assistance
  - It will keep the OCD static or make it worse
- Modifying Your Routine
  - It will foster dependence rather than independence

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Pacing of Treatment

- How quickly should family change the rules?
  - Some rules?
- Goal: All OCD should Start and Stop with the person
- Symptoms cannot be applied to others in forms of helping with follow through of compulsions or in form of accommodation/reassurances



"Many kids never hear that word at home, so I added 'no' to our vocabulary lesson."

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

How Do You Change the Behaviors?

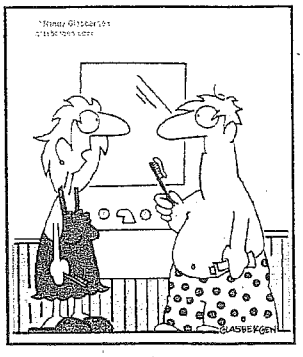
- Check in with the out patient Behavior Therapist for a cohesive treatment team
- If no Behavior Therapist, identify the most pressing/interfering behaviors first
- Or the easiest/most agreed upon behaviors are worked on first
- Again, a tradeoff between what the need of the family is vs. the need of the individual towards individuation

I am freezing
I want to
go to sleep

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

What Are Some of the Issues You May Encounter?

Family's values and beliefs:
- Cultural background does not allow for strong limit setting
- One parent follows through but the other doesn't or can't because of their own needs
- Parents or siblings are bullied into accommodating
- Family comes in and argues – nothing gets accomplished



"I'm surprised we gained weight over the holidays. You'd think family bickering would burn a lot of calories!"

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Family Treatment for Children and Adolescents

Goals of Family Treatment:
- Realign strategies for effective parenting.
- Improve understanding of OCD
- Improve communication among family members
- Build confidence in family member's response to OCD
- Provide strategies for how family members can cope with the disorder
- Provide a safe forum for family members to express their feelings
- Help parents understand their role in helping their child move forward
- Help siblings understand each other's perspective
- Help parents find the balance between helping their child progress, and letting them take healthy, appropriate risks

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

A Guideline for Family Treatment with Children

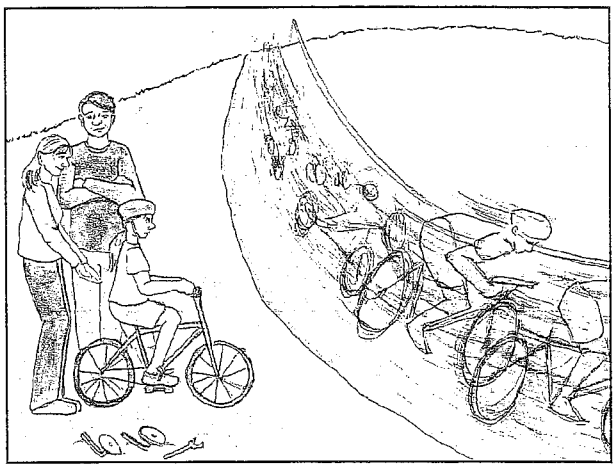
The first several sessions should include only the parents. For divorced parents you may have to do this twice.

Review and realign normal parenting strategies
- Make sure home is a safe place
- Set expectations for all family members
- Be firm, be loving
- Be consistent
- Model confidence in each family member
- Have a sense of humor

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

A Guideline for Family Treatment with Children (continued)

- Assist parents in resolving their guilt
- Educate families about OCD
- Talk to parents about realistic expectations



TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

A Guideline for Family Treatment with Children (continued)

- Assist parents in resolving their guilt
- Educate families about OCD
- Talk to parents about realistic expectations
- Give parents homework
- Give parents permission to take care of themselves
- Initially meet alone with the child (depending on their age)
- Teach parents how to set a tone of leadership
- Meet alone with siblings

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

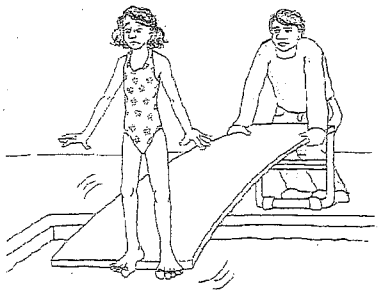
Guidelines for Treating Siblings in the Context of Family

- Let them know that family therapy is time limited
- Provide a forum to talk openly about their experience
- Provide education about OCD
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufqFO5B1vQY
- Teach parents about validating everyone's experience
- Recommend time set aside with each child

TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Guidelines for How Parents Should Respond to a Child with OCD

- Help parents let go
- Remain calm
- The behavior is not their responsibility to control



TREATMENT& EDUCATING THE FAMILY

Guidelines for How Parents Should Respond to a Child with OCD

- Help parents let go
- Remain calm
- The behavior is not their responsibility to control
- Don't wimp out. Stay strong!
- Set normal developmental expectations
- Normalize family life but set priorities
- Be flexible
- Is the child is not ready for change, meet with the family

HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF TREATMENT IS WORKING?

IS TREATMENT WORKING?

Results You Can Feel!

Reduction in angry tension

Laughter and chatter/banter among family members

Begin to see communal activities taking place with less formal planning

And, on the more subtle side, begin to hear/see more psychodynamic issues because now there is room to see, feel, and experience more than OCD symptoms

IS TREATMENT WORKING?

What if It Isn't Working?

What are your options as a clinician?

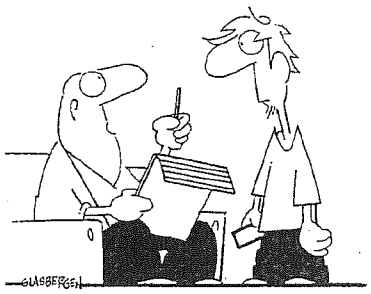
Divide and conquer! Who in the family is willing to work?

"Yeah but" ... the OCD sufferer wants to join

Insist on treatment YOUR way. BEHAVIOR, BEHAVIOR, BEHAVIOR

Do not get caught in circular arguments or reasoning. They are counterproductive!

Consider terminating treatment (therapeutic discharge) if seeing/hearing little to no changes after 6-8 weeks.



"Plan B: You get a job and we send your smartphone to college."

THERAPEUTIC DISCHARGE

THERAPEUTIC DISCHARGE

What Is It?

This is NOT an easy therapy process

Treatment for OCD, whether for the individual or the family, is an onerous process

There is nothing pleasant about it

Sometimes, people have to experience treatment, walk away and balance the misery of their life with OCD vs the misery of the treatment

Hopefully the increasing demands of the OCD will send them back to treatment and, when it does, we have observed the person/family to be more focused and motivated

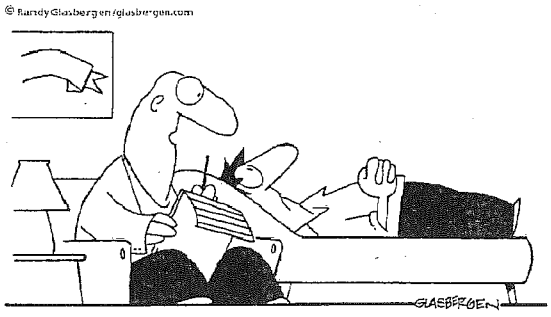
THERAPEUTIC DISCHARGE

How Do You Do It?

Assess family members' mental status. Can they be discharged back home? Do they need to be referred into some other form of treatment? (Substance Abuse, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Eating Disorder Treatment, PTSD, etc.)

Explain why the family therapy is not helpful at this time, and what will need to be different if they want to resume family work

Example: At this time, the family appears to be struggling with maintaining consistency in their expectations and limits. The family needs to work on anger management. Parents needs to come together to present a unified voice, etc.



"I need to reach whatever is buried deep in your psyche. I hope you're not opposed to fracking."

Contact Us!

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