

Battling life with mental illness: OCD vs. Me

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Going to bed started with eleven layers of Chapstick and a thorough search with a flashlight to make sure no one was in my room. I could not go to bed when the clock was on a multiple of thirteen, and had eleven seconds to turn on my

left side when the clock was on a so called “good” number. On that eleventh second I would say “goodnight I love you” to my guinea pig three times, and take one last breath, covering my neck with the blanket. When the second of thirteen arrived, I could not breathe or move, because if I were to be stabbed, that would be the second it would happen on. I then had eleven seconds to turn onto my other side and complete the same ritual with the number thirteen. Hello, I am Harper Hanson, and I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Throughout Creek, I constantly hear my peers saying things like “That is so OCD,” or “OCD much?” As people say this, my anxiety grows. My mental illness nor anyone else’s is an adjective. It is not a joke and it is not something to be casually thrown around in a conversation. It is a serious illness that affects 2.3% of the U.S. population.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, also known as OCD has dictated my life for over thirteen years. Although I wasn’t officially diagnosed until I was 13, I can track back to around age four and remember symptoms I had of the illness.

OCD consists of two parts, obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are unwanted thoughts or images that are projected into the mind and cause high amounts of anxiety and distress. Compulsions are rituals that are performed to try and decrease the anxiety obsessions cause, but in all actuality make the OCD worse.

Let us go back to my night time routine. It could take anywhere from ten minutes to over an hour; I completed this routine every single night for over five years.

Every action I completed was a compulsion, all trying to calm me from the obsessive thought of being stabbed. As I got older, the thought of being stabbed was less prominent, but the feeling of impending doom stepped in its place. Impending doom is a feeling “of if I do or do not complete this compulsion, something bad is going to happen.”

Over the past six months, my life has become increasingly easier to live, but getting here was not

easy, so how did I do it? The answer is, I got help.

This was something I was very fortunate to get, something (in the beginning) I was forced to do. You see, I was ashamed of my mental illness when I first started going to therapy and it is all because of the stigma behind therapy, mental illness, and the way people react.

Because of treatment and because of support, I have so much more freedom and the reigns of my OCD have loosened to a point of allowing me to function.

I like to describe OCD like a mosquito bite.

An obsessive thought is like the mosquito bite itch. It is next to impossible to ignore and is extremely distracting. The com-

pulsion is you actually itching the bite. This gives you relief for a couple seconds, but then the mosquito bite itches worse than it did the first time. This vicious cycle is how OCD works.

Living with OCD is like living in an obstacle course. There are constantly tasks you need to do and things you need to avoid.

Opposed to common beliefs, OCD is not the constant urge to wash my hands, and it is not the urge to keep everything organized. For me, OCD is the constant feeling that I was in danger or the ones I love are in danger. It is this feeling of impending doom that destroyed my functionability, keeping me in this prison of what I believed to be protection. The only

problem was that this protection did not exist. It was fabricated by my OCD.

OCD’s job is to protect me from the dangers of this world but in all actuality, stopped me from enjoying this world.

I think one common misconception about telling people I have gone to treatment for a mental health condition is that often people expect me to be cured and live a perfectly happy life.

Yes, I am in a better place than before, and I am able to live a fairly normal and stable life, but that isn’t to say I am 100% all right all of the time. I still have bad days where my OCD rituals spike and I still have days where my functioning is next to nothing, but not all days are bad days, and that is the best part because there are many good days too.

I will always have OCD but I know now that I am not alone. I have coping skills, a family that loves me, great friends, and a life worth living, but where I am today took time. Lots of it. Four years of therapy twice a week, medication, two partial hospitalization programs, 14 weeks in Florida, Exposure and Response Prevention Therapy everyday, and a lot of courage.

Getting help was one of the hardest things I have ever done, but what was even harder, was accepting the fact that I needed help. Because of therapy, because of support, and because of time, I was able to get where I am today, but 80% of 13-18 year olds are not receiving treatment for mental health conditions (National Alliance on Mental Illness).

Recovery is possible. The time you take to get yourself healthy and do the things that make you healthy are just a blip on the radar when it comes to the bigger timeline of your life. It is what you do now that will make your future time worth it. Now is not your forever, but you have to choose that, you have to choose to fight.

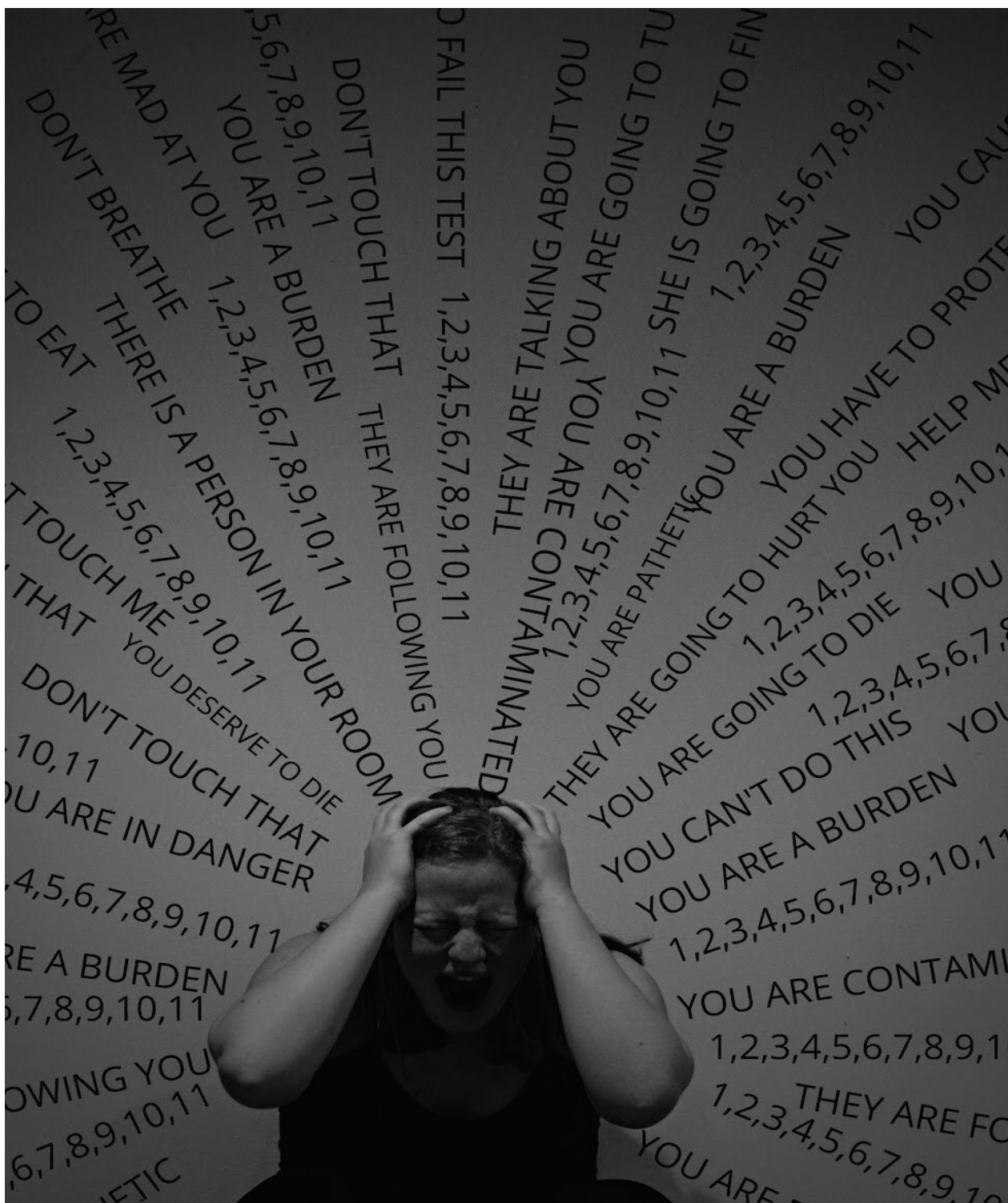


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12 Hours and Up: Over 12 hours a day would be filled with these obsessive thoughts and compulsions. Simply living became exhausting. OCD challenged my every move, but with treatment I was able to deal with it.