



P.O. Box 66540  
Albuquerque, NM 87193  
505.890.6806  
E-mail: [lrn@liferesource.org](mailto:lrn@liferesource.org)  
Website: [www.liferesource.org](http://www.liferesource.org)

**Presentation Transcript**  
**Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior**  
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The title of today's presentation is *Mental Health and the Bible – Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior*.

A number of years ago I went four-wheeling near Socorro, New Mexico, with a friend, who was my mentor in my counseling training. I was relatively inexperienced at that time – just getting started. He'd been doing it for twenty-five years. After a long day of four-wheeling in hundred degree temperatures, we stopped at a restaurant on the way home to re-hydrate and get a bite to eat. After we ordered, we both headed for the men's room, and then returned. After we returned to our table, my friend asked me if I noticed the other gentleman in the restroom with us. I said, "I noticed there was a guy washing up." He said, "Did you notice how many times he washed his hands?" And, of course, I didn't. And he explained to me that he watched this man take off his shirt to wash his hands. He had a special bottle of soap and he washed his hands very methodically four times while we were in there and was headed to number five as we were leaving. This man was exhibiting obsessive-compulsive behavior.

So today we're going to take a look at that kind of behavior. Why would we do that at church? Well, because this kind of behavior can be very debilitating to people and, because it can make being a Christian very difficult and, because there is a lot that can be done about it. So we're going to explain what it is, what causes OCD and what to do about it. And we're going to do it all in thirty minutes. So I have to get on my horse if we're going to do that. We're not going to be able to cover the topic completely. It's more of an overview, but I can give a summary and point to some interesting resources. So that's what we'll do.

The behavior is usually ritualistic behavior. It centers around ordering things, counting things, cleanliness, sometimes morality. We see people that have OCD locking their doors

over and over again. Maybe you remember the movie, *As Good As It Gets*, where he would have to lock the door, doing it over and over.

I had a client who had to fold the napkins just a certain way, and all the washcloths got folded a certain way, and then she would go to put them away, and she'd have to lift up the one's that were clean and stick the just-cleaned ones underneath so they all got rotated. If her husband didn't do that, it was a disaster. You see people showering – and stuff like that – over and over again. Morality can sometimes figure into it. There's an aspect of OCD called *scrupulosity*. I had a twelve-year-old girl who had this. She had to check in with her mother to know if some of her fears about her behavior were sins or not. She'd keep coming back to check. I asked her, "What kind of sins are we talking about?" She was sitting in my office, wearing a pair of kind of long shorts that came to just above her knee when she sat down. She said that, if she wore a dress or pants that were that short when she was standing up, she would feel like she would have to go ask her mother about that – over and over again. There's also a thing about too much makeup and that kind of thing that she was always worried about. Interesting to note that scrupulosity tends to manifest itself most in the Catholic Church. She was Roman Catholic.

So obsessions and compulsions – obsessive-compulsive behavior. The obsession is the thought and the compulsion is about the behavior. "I can't stop thinking about checking the windows until I check the windows." Checking the windows – the compulsion; thinking about it – the obsession. Why? Why do people do this? Well, they do it to avoid some imagined catastrophic event.

This man that was washing his hands. What would you think he might be trying to avoid? Disease, germs, getting sick. Yes. Or it could be something not connected, like a death in the family – something like that. Sometimes there is no logical connection between the behavior. We're going to talk more about why that might happen later.

Let's talk a little bit about severity. Most of us do some quirky little thing – don't step on the cracks, or count everything, or sit at the restaurant and fold the napkin, set everything up on the table just right. Sometime when you go to a cafe, just look around. I see it almost all the time now that I look for it. There's always somebody. Sometimes it's me. So does that make me an obsessive-compulsive? Well, it would if I did it so much that it caused me a lot of problems in my life. It's about severity. That's what determines it. Again, the movie, *As Good As It Gets*, do you remember the Jack Nicholson character had to wash his hands six times with a new bar of soap each time. He'd wash his hands once with a bar of soap, throw it away, rinse his hands in blazing hot water, and then get another brand new bar of soap and do it again – and do that six times. When he went out for breakfast, he couldn't step on any cracks on his way down to the cafe. He had to sit at the same table in the cafe every day, which irritated everybody in the restaurant,

including the waitress that he was interested in. So he was driving away his romantic interest. She thought he was weird. That is a raging case of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

By the way, if you wonder about some of the things you do, you can Google University of Hamburg Obsessive-Compulsion Screening and take it online – if you're interested. That's the University of Hamburg Obsessive-Compulsion Screening. It'll pop right up for you.

What causes it? Well, anxiety causes obsessive-compulsive behavior. It's an anxiety disorder. The guy washing his hands is trying to head off some kind of catastrophe. So the thought of catastrophe makes us anxious, right? So that's what he was doing. He was anticipating that.

I think I mentioned before that depression is the response to losses from the past and anxiety is the anticipation of losses in the future. So, some kind of loss. What kind of loss is created by an earthquake? Well, loss of safety, loss of life, loss of property, loss of loved ones. That's kind of how it all fits together.

Now, what do people do who are anxious to try to feel safe? Well, they try to control or manage their behavior more than most folks, because, if they can control everything, maybe they can head off the anticipated losses, or eliminate them, or minimize them. So we try to control our environment so we feel safe. People talk about control all the time, don't they? We talk about control-freaks, and people who are too controlling, and all that. That's where that comes from. It comes from anxiety. That's what drives it.

Have you ever noticed how certain companies are attractive to certain types of personalities? My son-in-law, Cody – if I can use his example here – applied for a job at this company and they offered him a really nice package. But, because he didn't have some of his paperwork in place, they just told him – cut and dried – “No.” They were just not going to take him. Everything was in process, but it just hadn't come in yet. He made the comment to me that it was just too black and white. “And, if that company is like that, maybe that's not the best place for me.” Some people really like that, especially if they're in charge of it. They like to have everything spelled out, black and white. They know how many people are on the black side and how many are on the white side and let's get rid of the rest. I mean, it's about personality and what people can handle, as far as their anxiety level.

There used to be a show on TV. It was a police show years ago – *NYPD Blue* – and there was a SWAT team leader on that show that was just...I mean, it was all whips and scorpions and blackjack boots. When you're in SWAT, that's what you do. So certain people, that are anxious people, tend to gravitate toward those kinds of positions. I'm not

saying that everybody that is in the police department, or everybody that is in the military is a control freak. But it's a personality thing. And, generally, different people are comfortable with different things.

So let's talk a little bit about balance on this. We're told that after He was resurrected in the tomb, Jesus neatly folded His clothes and left them there. A lot of people today would like to turn that into something that is OCD. Is there anything wrong with that? Now, being neat is not by itself a symptom of anxiety. We can look at the universe and see that God is orderly – that He is not the author of confusion. That's a scripture, right? 1 Corinthians 14:33. And some of those who are chaotic, who are chronically late, like to defend their lack by casting that aspersion on those who are neat and on time. It kind of complicates the understanding of what's going on. It's only a problem when it's so much that it's disrupting the life of the person and the lives of those around them. It's also a problem when we're so late or so chaotic that it affects us and those around us in a negative way. So, it's not just the neatness. There can be stuff on the other side of the thing, too.

The people who are on both those extremes hear the same thing from those around them. "Why can't you just get over it?" "Be on time!" Or, "Stop checking the lock." Telling people that doesn't help. In fact, it makes it worse. Why do people say that? Because we want to control those folks and make them do the right thing, right?

Let's look at some other things Jesus said. In Matthew 6, verse 25 – kind of a continuation here of the Sermon on the Mount – His initial educational discourse to the disciples. He said:

**Mt. 6:25** – *Therefore I tell you, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, nor about your body – what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"*

Elaine and I watched a movie awhile back. And I guess it was a documentary on this guy – Dieter – I forget his last name. He was a Vietnam pilot in the US Air Force or Navy. And he had been in Germany, as a child, while the US Air Force bombed his town in Germany. He was in the upstairs of his house and a US fighter plane flew by to where he was almost eyeball to eyeball with the fighter pilot. And he said he knew from that moment on he wanted to be a pilot. He identified with the perpetrator rather than with the victims. He was taken captive in Vietnam – shot down and starved – for three years. Now he lives up on Mount Diablo in the Bay Area of California in a very nice house, where he can see everything around him. And there's a gigantic basement filled with tons of food – tons of food – all kinds of it. Jesus said, "Don't be anxious about what you're going to eat

or drink.” So what’s getting in Dieter’s way of doing that? Well, what happened to him in his past? Right? It’s harder to have faith when you are filled with anxiety.

**V-27** – *And which of you, being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And while you are anxious about clothing, consider the lilies of the field – how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothed the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious – (do you notice that He says that word a lot in here?) – saying what shall we eat or what shall we wear. For the Gentiles seek after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will be added to you. Therefore – verse 34 – do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

Okay, we need to do some thinking about this. Does anxiety cause lack of faith? Or does lack of faith cause anxiety? Well, you could say both, I guess. It’s a cycle. But which comes first into a person’s life? Well, the anxiety does, doesn’t it? So, those of you who have problems with anxiety, are probably focusing on the fact that you might be thinking that I think that you’re a terrible person because you lack faith. I’m not thinking that. I know that lack of faith starts first with anxiety, and that comes from something else – that we don’t get to decide about. So we’re going to come back to that. I’m going to show you what to do.

Let’s continue on with what the Bible says about anxiety for a minute. Let’s go to Luke 10:38, It says,

**Lk. 10:38** – *Now, as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister, called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her, then, to help me.” But the Lord answered her and said, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.* So here’s a woman, who invited Him into her home – that’s good, right? – but He said that she’s anxious. And He said that she’s anxious about *many* things – not just about cracks, or the napkins, but *many* things. So, that would be kind of generalized anxiety, wouldn’t it? Now, does she have generalized anxiety disorder? Well, we don’t know. We know it’s affecting her relationship with her sister and with Jesus a little bit, but how much is there, we don’t know. But it kind of points toward this thing that people get into, where they worry about the wrong things.

So, that's another thing that anxiety does to us. Besides making it hard for us to have faith, it makes it hard for us to focus on what is important. That's what He said, right? Okay, so that's the problem for people, isn't it? Rather than focusing on what is really important in life, we get "major in the minors" a lot. Or we fret about things that aren't that important in the long run. So that distracts us from what's important. And then the other aspect to it, of course, is that if you're anxious, it's harder to be faithful – full of faith.

So what do we do about that, as Christians? Until recently, most of the behavioral health field thought that anxiety was a brain chemistry problem – that it was something that you couldn't do anything about. And the drug companies, of course, did all the research to prove all that, because they want to make you believe that the only thing you can do about that is take pills. Now that they're doing all this brain research, they're finding out that is most definitely *not* the case. I want to ask you this, too. If a person had a brain chemistry problem they couldn't control, would it be fair of Jesus to command us to stop being anxious? He wouldn't do that.

So what have we learned in brain research lately? I was reading a book one day about therapy – it was called *Being a Brain-wise Therapist* – and the author brought up the topic of free will versus genetic programming. You know all the evolutionary people believe that we're kind of like dogs and cats. We just operate according to our programming, and there really is no such thing as free will among people. But to prove the fact that she believed in free will, she cited some work done at UCLA by a Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz on OCD. He has demonstrated conclusively, by our own free will, we can change the way our brain is wired, such that OCD rituals and obsessive thoughts can be eliminated or reduced. You do it by *thinking* your way through it. Isn't that interesting how that turns out? Now, he also believes that medications, in some instances, are helpful. And I know some people that that has been true of, but there are people that have OCD so badly that no amount of drugs really helps them. It's very debilitating. But a combination of his efforts with even the worst cases and some lesser use of drugs, pretty much, makes them functional again. And for a lot of the people that he sees, they don't need any medication when they're done, because they can control or manage that or even get rid of it.

So that's hard research. It has evidence behind it. It's empirically validated – that we can think our way out of most of it. That means, to me, that Jesus knew what He was talking about when He said, "Don't be anxious."

I've had many Christians come to me and say, "I'm anxious. I've prayed, I've fasted, I've studied my Bible, I've gone to church, I've taken care of the poor, I've helped set up chairs in straight rows at church services, but nothing works! It doesn't work." Well, those are the things that we have to do to overcome anxiety. We have to understand *why*

we're anxious, *why* we're anticipating future losses, *why* we need to feel safe. And we need to understand also something about the way the brain works. That's quite different from asking God to just take it away from us.

I like to think that way myself. I want to play the piano, but I don't want to have to practice. I want to be able to sing without taking voice lessons. I want to be good at sports without having to do all the work that athletes have to do to get good at their stuff. And I don't want to have obsessive-compulsive behaviors and I don't want to have to do any work to get rid of them. I just want God to wave the magic wand and take it away. It doesn't work like that. *We* have to do some work. We *have* to do the inner work. And most of us just don't know how to go about doing that, because we've kind of been religiously programmed to believe in the magic wand of God. And yet, He wants us to do some work.

So how do you think your way out of OCD? Well, I'm going to talk about two cases that I worked with.

A lady came to me one day and she had a list of behaviors she wanted to get rid of. It was putting washcloths under the others, and checking the locks, and checking the windows, and not sleeping with her closet door open, and...twenty-five of them. Okay? Making her life miserable. I made a copy of that list, and gave her list back, and I put my list in her folder. And then I forgot all about it while I worked on her getting rid of all of her anxiety that she had accumulated in her life as a child. And then one day she brought her list back in, and she said, "You know, I'm not doing any of these things anymore. And I didn't even know I'd quit. I asked my husband the other day, and he said, 'Yeah, you've just been gradually letting go of that stuff. I've been watching it.'" But she didn't even realize it. It just kind of snuck up on her. So, what she had to do was to process the things from her childhood and past that caused her to be anxious. And when she did that, the OCD behavior just went away. So she came in asking me to help her learn to *manage* her OCD behavior. We never did one minute of work on management. *She* made it go away by working on the stuff from her past that was driving that behavior, which was her anxiety. She didn't think that could ever happen to her. She was so deep in those habits. And yet, it went away effortlessly when she put effort in on just processing what happened in her past.

Okay, that's one situation. The other one is the little girl I mentioned that had the case of scrupulosity. Now, her mother told me that she had the same problem. It started about the same time this little girl – about twelve years old – and still had it to this day, even though she was a very functional adult. But she got treatment and she was on some medication. The girl's aunt also had it. Are you getting the picture that this is somewhat genetic related? And that it was some problem in the brain going on there? I asked the mother about her background. I asked about the aunt. I asked the little girl about her background.

And none of them had really suffered any abuse or anything that would really cause a lot of anxiety. Her parents got a divorce, but they handled that fairly well. They didn't trash each other. It wasn't a big knock-down, drag-out situation. It was all handled in a fairly civilized manner. So I thought that was evidence pointing to a malfunction in the way her brain worked.

Now here's what Dr. Schwartz has discovered. He said that when we process stuff that has to do with being safe, there's an order that they go through. And this order takes us to different places in the brain. We want to feel safe, so we decide to check the locks on the door. So feeling safe is in one place, deciding to go check the locks is another. With most of us, after that, it just goes to going off to bed and sleeping well. But for some folks, the need to feel safe, the locking the door doesn't produce a feeling of safety that loops back through the same part of the brain again and again. He likened it to having a gating problem, where the gate doesn't open and let it through. He says it's like rusty. So he says – and this is where he gets his results – as he teaches people a way to think about that while they're caught in that looping situation – he says you have to ask yourself a question: What will happen if I don't lock the locks again? And before that, you tell yourself – when you first experience the urge to do that – “This is a gating problem in my brain. This isn't me. It's just some little minor glitch in the way I work. And so, what would happen if I don't lock the lock? Can I make it fifteen minutes? Can I make it thirty? What would happen if I don't do it for fifteen minutes?” So, it's like that. It's kind of where you do battle with the urge. And gradually, if you're persistent enough about that, the gate opens and the thought goes through. And if you do that enough, you unstick the gate, so that it starts working again. That's how he thinks about it. Like I said, they've had really good benefits from that.

Now, this little girl I was telling you about – with the mother who went through that kind of therapy and got good results with it.... Just to be sure, I went through this little girl's past with her – step by step – and we did EMDR on all the things she'd been upset about in her childhood. And then I said, “Now we're going to start doing this other thing.” And we couldn't find anything to do it on. She wasn't having any scrupulosity issues currently. And I said, “Okay, so you're going to come back the first time you have one of these issues and we're going to go to work on it.” Her mother said, “Yes.” That was eight months ago. I've been in contact with them and the girl is not having any of those issues right now. So, what I thought was probably a genuine type of gating problem – and I do believe those things exist – it looked like it – it seems to me – you know, the book's not written on that – it seems to me like just going through what minor things were causing her anxiety from her past solved her problem, without her having to learn to manage it and do all that work.

Christians and OCD – some more. George Mueller. Do we know who he is? George Mueller is the guy who founded the orphanage in England with no money, and who has



this huge list of miracles that occurred that allowed him to take care of all these people in God's name, and every time he needed something, it just showed up. He said, "The beginning of anxiety – whenever that might be in a person's life – is the end of faith and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety." So that makes us feel really bad, because that means, if we have anxiety, we don't have faith. I don't think that's what he was saying.

How can a Christian apply the principles we've talked about to obsessive need to control things and events? Well, let's read what 1 Peter says – chapter 5, verse 6. It says:

**1 Pt. 5:6** – *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.*

Do I need to lock the doors more than once? Where does God fit into that? Would I rather be in the Kingdom than control every aspect of my environment? I know that God cares for me and He will take care of me while I sleep. So how long can I resist the urge to take matters into my own hands? I think that, if we have faith in God, and we apply that to the process, it's even more effective for us if we're *believers*. Verse 8 says:

**V-8** – *Be sober, be watchful* – what for? Well, *because your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* How does he do that? Well, we have several examples of him prowling around. He prowled around Job. What did he do to him? He inflicted losses on him. What do losses cause? Anxiety. Right? So that's how the devil works with us in this process. He inflicts losses on us and that creates anxiety. Sometimes the losses are a loss of safety, or a loss of control. And what are we to do? Verse 9:

**V-9** – *Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.* So we resist the looping urge to take control.

**V-10** – *And after you have suffered* – verse 10 – *a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.* Isn't that a promise? It is, isn't it? *To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.* With OCD, the term *fighting the good fight* seems to fit. Resisting anxiety – that circular, cyclical, looping kind of thing.

So I think most of the OCD that I have seen has its basis in losses that we've experienced and haven't processed sufficiently to reduce the anxiety. I'm never going to engage somebody in that kind of cognitive behavioral approach of just managing things, until I've first gone through and processed all the past stuff, because it seems, to me, that that

is so effective in helping people. And then, if there is still something left that hasn't been taken care of, then I would use the more directive approach with people.

So we have a workshop at LifeResource on processing the past. We'd be happy to come to your congregation or group and put that on for you. There are also other really great resources out there. One of them is called *The OCD Workbook*. If you're troubled by these things, just Google it. It's there. Or, we have a phone number. You can call us. There are ways to deal with these things and God says that He wants to be involved in that process with us. The quirky little things you do in the restaurant – not to worry. But the things that are ruining our lives – there's a way to resolve those problems.