

## CAN A “CLEAN FREAK” FIND HAPPINESS?

Dear Dr. K.,

I am a ‘clean freak’. I like things spotless. I spend a lot of time cleaning and washing because I’m so concerned about germs. I always check things several times before I can leave the house. My habits take up a lot of time. Yet if I don’t do these things, I get very nervous that something bad is going to happen. Does this mean that I am obsessive compulsive?

Mary Beth

Dear Mary Beth,

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is an emotional problem in which you are *driven* (how you probably feel) to do things over and over (the compulsion) by thoughts that go over and over (the obsessions). We all worry about things. If they are severe, we obsess over them....that’s normal and part of being human. There are those of us who are fastidious, very organized and, in fact, may make a good income because we are this way. This is not OCD. When you cannot stop the thoughts and actions, like washing your hands repeatedly or checking a door 20 times to be sure it is locked or going around the block over and over to check that you did not run someone over, then it’s OCD. OCD is an anxiety disorder. It can be a disabling condition that persists throughout someone’s life. It is called the ‘secret’ illness because although the people who suffer from it are plagued by strange and repetitive thoughts and actions they keep secret because they are aware of how strange the symptoms are. They are embarrassed, say nothing and rarely get treatment. They wonder if they are ‘crazy’ and, fearing this, avoid talking about it. The irony is that those that are aware of the inappropriate quality of their thoughts are *never* crazy, they only suffer (people who are psychotic do not recognize how bizarre their symptoms are.)

Some patients have horrific thoughts of doing something bad and some have to do things a certain way like wash your hair seven times each morning in the exact same way. If the person diverged from the pattern, she had to start all over again. Another patient was so obsessed with germs that, should the clothes she had just washed touch anything as she transferred them to the dryer; she HAD to wash them again.

The thoughts are senseless or frightening but so repetitive that they are hard to resist (“Did I really lock the door?”). The action is the checking or action (“I’ll go and check it one more time to be sure it’s locked”). The compulsions are ways of relieving the worry, like washing your hands when you worry about germs, but the relief is only temporary and you have to do it again and again.

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Dr. K is Stan Kapuchinski, M.D., a board-certified psychiatrist still practicing in Punta Gorda, FL. For an appointment or if you have questions, please email him at [DrK@StopYourMisery.com](mailto:DrK@StopYourMisery.com). Dr. K.’s book, ***Say Goodbye To Your PDI (Personality Disordered Individual), Recognize People Who Make You Miserable and Eliminate Them From Your Life for Good!*** is available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), [Barnes & Noble Booksellers](http://Barnes & Noble Booksellers), and [HCI Books](http://HCI Books). Visit his website: [www.StopYourMisery.com](http://www.StopYourMisery.com)

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# Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

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The most common obsessions are worries about doing something (is the door is locked? the alarm clock set? or the range is turned off) and anxiety over germs or contamination. The most common compulsions are checking and rechecking and washing or cleaning. Some people can spend hours checking and rechecking the door to be sure it is locked. This is the curse of OCD, the perpetual doubt.

OCD often does run in families with it occurring as often in males as females. We do not know what causes the problem. We do know that it is related to areas of the brain that have the brain chemical serotonin. OCD can start at any time from preschool age to adulthood. It usually occurs by age 40. Often, people spend many years keeping their OCD a secret and not getting treatment since they still hide parts of the symptoms so it becomes difficult for the doctor to diagnose.

Treatment of OCD involves medications that boost the amount of serotonin in the brain and help the problem. Many times, behavioral therapy can also help. Usually, a combination of the two is frequently the best way to eradicate the symptoms. OCD is *very* treatable and can allow a person to have a normal life...free of unrelenting obsessive thoughts and actions.

An excellent website for more information is [www.ocdfoundation.org](http://www.ocdfoundation.org). If you have symptoms that you might consider to be obsessive-compulsive disorder, seek out a psychiatrist and discuss your concerns...without embarrassment. This is nothing new to a psychiatrist and he or she can help you...but get treatment. Your life can change dramatically.

Dr. K.

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