You, Me and Relationship OCD:

Diagnosis, Treatment and Intimacy with rOCD

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relationship OCD



* Inherent uncertainty in every relationship
* Intrusive thoughts surrounding
  * “rightness” of relationship
  * strength of feelings towards the partner
  * perception of partner’s feelings towards self
  * perceived deficits of partner (appearance, intelligence, sociability, and morality)
* May surround familial relationships as well

Worry vs. rOCD

- Functional doubt vs. obsessions and compulsions
  - "Even though it can be scary to begin a new relationship, I'm open to seeing where this goes."
  - "What if he/she isn't the one for me and then I will never be happy and could miss the right relationship."
- It is not genuine safety concerns
- rOCD symptoms are "less self-congruent, more likely associated with compulsive safety behaviors, and perceived as less rational than a worry"

Presentation of symptoms

* Partner focused symptoms
  * Ruminating on a wide variety of partner's perceived flaws
    * Appearance, intelligence, sociability, and morality
      * ex: "What if I'm not actually attracted to her? I can't stop thinking about her nose." "What if he's not smart enough?" "What if she's a liar?"
* Relationship centered symptoms
  * Can come in the form of thoughts, images, urges
  * ex: "Are we happy enough?", urge to leave relationship, "I'm not feeling enough of the right emotion".

Common Compulsions

- Repeatedly checking one's feelings (emotionally, physically, mentally)
- Comparing physical, mental, emotional characteristics of partner to other individuals
- Neutralizing (imagining opposite of intrusive thought)
- Reassurance seeking
  - via other individuals, self, or the internet

* **Trigger**: Spending time with couple-friends who appear happy.
* **Intrusion**: "What if we're not as happy as they are?"
* **Fear**: I'm not in the right relationship and am missing "the one" and will never be happy.
* **Compulsion**: Thinking back on all happy experiences in your relationship. Asking others how they view the relationship. Avoiding the "next step" in the relationship.

* **Trigger**: Having a lighthearted conversation with partner about musical preference.
* **Intrusion**: "What if he is pretentious because he thinks classical is the best type of music?"
* **Fear**: He is pretentious.
* **Compulsion**: Reading dictionary definition of words. Asking friends what they think of pretentiousness.

* **Trigger**: Seeing an attractive person (who is not your partner).
* **Intrusion**: "What if I am more attracted to them than my girlfriend?"
* **Fear**: I don't really love my girlfriend and should break up with her.
* **Compulsion**: Reading dictionary definition of words. Checking physical signs of being "in love". Avoiding attractive individuals.

Impact on Relationships

* guilt and shame brought on by obsessions and compulsions
* Continued analysis: Is this ego dystonic vs ego syntonic?
    * having thoughts, images, impulses that are repugnant
        * "I know appearance is not the most important thing, how come I can't stop thinking this way?"
    * having normal doubt about relationships
        * "This relationship might not last forever."
* Can lead to relationship dissolving or avoidance of relationships

Exposure Therapy

* Read stories about people who have “scammed” or “fled” their partner (or what ever the feared consequence is)
* Write Imaginal Exposures
* Watch movies about liars, cheaters, “runaway brides” and disruptive relationships
* Commit to partner (using authenticity)

Reduction of Compulsions

* Reduction of mental checking/mental rumination
    * arousal
    * subjective experience of “love” for partner
    * mental comparison with other couples etc
    * “mental hoards” memories and feelings
    * commitment
    * imagery “Can I see myself with this person?”

Reduction of Compulsions

* Reduction of Reassurance Seeking (with partner, family members, internet searches, comparison)
* Reduction of compulsive "testing" (compulsive sexual interaction, compulsive communication (texts, emails, calls, conversations)
* Reduction of relationship avoidance (avoidance of dating, saying "I love you", avoidance of commitment, such as engagement, saying "boyfriend" etc)
* Reduction of neutralizing thoughts

Case study

* 29 yr old female
* Fear = "I secretly don't love him," despite true feelings and desire to commit to her partner (ego dystonic vs ego syntonic)
* Compulsively "mental hoards" her experiences, to be "sure" she felt 100% love for her partner
* Compulsively ruminates if she experiences less than 100% love for her partner.
* Compulsive mental rumination about possibly lying about her feelings, and subsequently, tries to find certainty that she is/is not lying
* Compulsive Reassurance seeks her authenticity with partner

Case study

* 32 year old male with girlfriend for ~2 years
* Fears he will cause harm to befall his girlfriend through cheating on her "without knowing it" even though he knows he would never cheat
* Fears he may not be "right" about his feelings towards her even though he knows he is in love with her
* Compulsively avoids doing things on his own, speaking to female friends, leaving his house, keeps mental lists of routes he takes in public places where other females are present, avoids words with the letter "x" in them.
* Compulsively checks his emotions and thinks back on previous relationships
* Exposures: walk purposefully around females, run errands on his own, say the word "cheat" out loud, write fear narrative
* Bans: avoidance, checking, mental lists, reassurance seeking

Mindfulness in Relationships

* Increase awareness of thoughts and become and observer to them
* Willingly allow the thoughts to be there, without fusing with them
* Willingly allow mental and physical discomfort = Occupation
* Practice Non-judgment for thoughts and feelings
* Stay present (no mental rumination about current, past or future events)
* Practice mindful communication

Ways to support your partner

* Don't
    * Use logic and rationale
    * Give reassurance
    * Accommodate anxiety
    * Get mad
* Do
    * Validate
    * Encourage
    * Celebrate victory
    * Be genuine

Questions?

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