mental compulsions 101

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You probably got this handout after asking some version of:

- "I'm an anxious person. Telling me to stop overthinking is like telling me to stop breathing. If I could do it, I wouldn't have anxiety, would I?"
- "I have OCD and I've got a handle on my *physical* compulsions, but the *mental* stuff is what really bothers me. How do I stop constantly wondering whether [I'm a serial killer/I'll die of COVID-19/my friends hate me]?"
- "My anxiety brain is automatic. The thoughts just happen. They're not under my control. How do just make them not bother me so much? I'm not magic! They *do* bother me!"
- "My last therapist just told me to stop having anxious thoughts. That's a dick move…right?"

The good news is that the thoughts you're describing aren't a permanent part of your brain. They're treatable. Your brain can learn to feel less anxious. We're not talking about just learning coping skills or doing worksheets. We're talking about implementing a long-term solution to anxiety.

In other words, getting over anxiety is not a squishy fairy-dust concept. It's both possible and relatively straightforward. Your ability to lower your anxiety—permanently—is based on your willingness to develop a specific set of skills and use them consistently.

vocab stuff

Therapists use a lot of different words for overthinking. Some words you might have heard are:

- Overanalysis
- Mental review
- Worrying
- Ruminating
- Stressing out
- Anxiety
- "Pure O" OCD

- Decision paralysis
- Analysis paralysis
- Compulsive thinking
- Dwelling
- Fretting
- Overpreparation
- Choice overload

Going forward, I'll use the word "mental compulsions" for what we're talking about here. I'll tell you why in a moment, but first, let's talk about what compulsions are.

what's a compulsion?

A compulsion is something you do to avoid distressing or uncomfortable feelings. Some therapists call them "avoidance behaviors," "safety behaviors," or "rituals." Some examples might be:

- Cleaning your bathroom repeatedly because it feels dirty, even if you don't need to
- Avoiding asking your boss for things you need at work, even when you know your boss will be nice about it
- Asking your family repeatedly for reassurance that you're not a bad person
- Drinking because you feel sad
- Not talking at a party because you're afraid you'll say something stupid
- Distracting yourself with mobile games because you don't want to make a decision
- Tracking your child's phone location to make sure they're not dead

Is everything that helps you deal with distress a compulsion? No. It's normal to do comforting things when you're feeling strong emotions, like talking to friends or taking a nap. What makes them compulsions is when (a) you use them as a way to avoid emotions rather than making space for yourself to feel them, and (b) they start to interfere with the way you want to live your life.

Why is this important? Because overthinking is a compulsion. It's something you *do*, not something that just happens to you. That means *you can control your mental compulsions.*

wait, aren't anxious thoughts automatic?

Yes and no. There's a part you can control and a part you can't control. But it's the part you have control over that causes you the most problems. Here's why.

the nature of mental compulsions

Mental compulsions follow a predictable pattern. They're pretty much the same for everyone.

- **The trigger.** Something in your environment causes you to have an intrusive thought.
  - **Examples:**
    - "I watched a movie about cheating partners."
    - "I saw a *Dateline* special about a man who kidnapped a child."
    - "My dog sneezed."
- **The intrusive thought.** A thought that results from an environmental trigger.
  - **Examples:**
    - "I wondered whether my partner could be cheating on me."
    - "I thought, 'What if *I* secretly want to abuse kids?'"
    - "I worried about my dog getting sick and dying."
- **The emotion.** An emotion you feel as a result of an intrusive thought. Fear is one of the most common ones.
  - **Examples:**
    - "I felt sad that my partner could potentially abandon me."
    - "I was afraid that I might be a dangerous, depraved person."
    - "It was terrifying to think that I could be responsible for my dog's death if I'm not careful enough about his health."
- **The compulsion(s).** Something you do to bring down your distress levels.
  - **Examples:**
    - "I spent the afternoon analyzing my partner's behavior in the last week."
    - "I thought back through my life and whether I'd ever had any sexually violent thoughts or attraction to kids."

- ▪ "I started planning what I'd do if my dog got sick."

The first three things—the trigger, intrusive thought, and emotion—are *involuntary*. You can't control what environmental triggers you encounter unless you avoid anything that could possibly be a trigger, which would probably mean staying in bed all day. And even then, you'd probably still randomly think of triggering things. You also can't make yourself not have intrusive thoughts. Everyone has those, even the really scary or disgusting ones. And you can't make yourself stop having emotions about those thoughts. They're genuinely scary thoughts, and often, they're about things that could actually happen in real life.

But the fourth thing? The compulsion part? The thing you do with your brain to bring down your distress levels? That's voluntary. It's not an intrusive thought or an involuntary emotion. You can choose not to do it.

why are compulsions bad again?

Earlier, I said the voluntary part—the compulsion—was the part of this equation that was causing you problems, not the intrusive thoughts or the emotions you have about them.

Compulsions can be attractive and tempting. They might even seem necessary to avoid danger. In the short term, they bring down your distress to manageable levels. In the long term, though…

- Compulsions take time out of your day
- Compulsions keep the anxious thoughts in your head all day
- Compulsions don't make the thoughts go away forever because you have to keep doing compulsions to keep feeling safe
- You might avoid fun, interesting activities because they cause you anxious thoughts
- You never learn to feel safer in distressing situations
- You never learn to tolerate strong emotions like fear or sadness
- Your distress levels about the things that make you anxious never go down

Intrusive thoughts and their accompanying emotions can be unpleasant. However, if you learn to consistently avoid mental compulsions…

- You'll spend less time performing mental compulsions
- Anxious thoughts will leave your head more quickly
- You won't have to do compulsions in order to feel safe
- You won't avoid things you find fun and interesting
- You'll learn to feel safer in situations that used to cause you distress
- You'll be able to let yourself feel strong emotions, which means that intrusive thoughts will have less power over you
- Gradually, you'll start to feel less and less distress when you get intrusive thoughts

okay, how do i do that?

It's more of a *not-doing* thing than a *doing* thing. When you experience an intrusive thought and feel a strong emotion as a result of that, don't do anything about it. Let yourself feel the emotion, and let the thought be in your head without trying to push it out.

This is not going to be easy, and it's also not going to be intuitive. You'll feel a strong pressure to perform mental compulsions because the emotions your intrusive thoughts evoke are so strong. Some common mental compulsions include:

- Mental review (analyzing events, thoughts, or feelings you've had in the past)
- Planning and problem-solving
- Trying to find out whether a particular thought is true
- Reassuring yourself that the thought isn't true
- Trying to get rid of or keep away intrusive thoughts
- Staying vigilant in case the thought or feeling comes back
- Monitoring your thoughts and feelings about a particular topic
- Testing your reactions to things
- Distracting yourself (with something you don't necessarily want to do, not just going about your day)
- Thought neutralizing (e.g. saying special words in your head, picturing something that "erases" or "undoes" the bad thought)

All of these compulsions have one thing in common: they're good at bringing down your distress levels. When you do them, you feel like you're doing something useful. For example, if you're trying to figure out something important, you can use mental compulsions to convince yourself—for the moment, at least—that it's possible to know that thing with complete certainty. If you're worried about something bad happening, you can do a mental compulsion to persuade yourself for a little while that you can gain 100% control over whether that thing happens.

But as we've already found out, certainty never lasts. The thoughts come back stronger than ever. Why? Because it's not actually possible to gain 100% certainty about anything. There will always be a second "what-if" even after you've thought throught the first "what-if." You'll never gain certainty by performing mental compulsions. In the long run, you'll actually make yourself feel less certain.

wait, is this "disengagement" stuff the same as trying not to think about something? i do that already!

Nope. Trying to stop thinking certain thoughts, get them out of your brain, or distract yourself from them is actually a compulsion. When you try not to think about something, you're actively making a decision not to tolerate the thought or to let yourself feel the emotions it brings.

The difference is between *passive awareness* and *active engagement*. Put another way, it's the difference between just *having* a thought in your head and *doing* something with it. When we say "don't engage with the thought," we don't mean "don't have the thought in your head at all" or "don't feel any emotions about the thought."

You can have the intrusive thought in your head all you want. In fact, if you stop engaging with it, it probably won't leave right away. It might stick around in the corner of your brain. It might get really loud and try to get your attention. Or you might keep having new intrusive thoughts that grab your attention. None of that is within your control. But it's within your control to stop deliberately concentrating *on* the thought or deliberately concentrating on something that's *not* the thought. You can go about your day with the thought still in your head somewhere. If you do that without engaging with the thought or trying to control your emotions, it will go away faster.

what's going to happen when I stop performing mental compulsions?

You'll probably feel bad. You'll experience the negative emotions that come with the intrusive thought. You may be barraged with repetitive intrusive thoughts that cause you intense and terrible feelings.

This is not a failure state. You're not trying to stop having intrusive thoughts—that's impossible!—and you're not trying to stop having emotions—also impossible! Your goal is purely to stop engaging with the thoughts, even if they're still in your head.

okay, so this is just forever, then?

No. It'll probably be awful at first, but you'll soon start experiencing two things: distress *tolerance* and distress *reduction*.

Distress tolerance is the ability to let yourself feel negative emotions like fear without escaping from them. The more you practice disengaging from intrusive thoughts, the easier it will be to do it in the future. You may still feel distress, but you'll be able to do everyday stuff and think about other things without being interrupted or having to do burdensome mental compulsions that take you out of the moment. You'll also be able to stop avoiding situations that trigger these thoughts because you'll know you can stop engaging with them. You might find yourself doing more things you enjoy, even if the intrusive thoughts still bother you. If you're consistent, you'll probably notice that the thoughts go out of your head more quickly instead of sticking around like they do when you engage with them.

Distress reduction is when your overall distress levels in response to intrusive thoughts go down. That may take longer to happen than distress tolerance, but it will happen with practice. If you refrain from mental compulsions, your brain will learn that it's safe to have "bad" thoughts in your head without doing anything about them. Over time, it will stop bombarding you with fear signals when you get an intrusive thought. Mental compulsions will stop feeling so urgent. Very likely, so will physical compulsions.

great, so i'll just keep feeling better and better?

Yes. Largely. However, I've seen one thing happen so consistently with my clients that it's worth mentioning here.

When you start letting yourself feel your feelings…you have to feel your feelings. That sounds stupidly obvious, but what I'm trying to say is that you might discover that your anxious behaviors—mental or physical—have been covering up a lot of complex, difficult emotions. You might have spent so long avoiding these emotions that you didn't even know they were there. They might be feelings about your family or your partner, for example, or about things that happened to you a long time ago.

When people stop avoiding their emotions, it sometimes feels more urgent to actually deal with the real-life problems that are causing them. You might discover that you're unhappy with your relationships or that you hate the job you've spent most of your life doing. These realizations might result in *more* emotional distress, not less, at least temporarily—not to mention the physical inconvenience of actually doing something about these problems.

Overall, though, feeling your emotions will probably lead to good things. Making changes in your life and accepting uncomfortable truths isn't fun. But it's better than being anxious all the time and letting your life go in a direction you don't like.

It may also be true that these under-the-surface emotions haven't been completely covered up by anxiety. You might find that they're surfacing in unpredictable ways—maybe when you're reminded of a distressing topic, for example. The longer you wait to feel your emotions, the more intense, troubling, and unpredictable they might become.

but is disengagement a smart thing to do? what if i disengage from a thought that's actually important and relevant to me?

This is one of the most common objections people have to stopping mental compulsions. How do you know if a thought is actually an intrusive thought? What if it's a really important thought that you should do something about?

Here's the thing. There's no way to know. Your body doesn't come with an objective truth sensor that tells you, "Yes, *this* thought is important but this *other* thought is just random noise."

You do, however, have a brain. You can make judgments about what to do. You might be saying: "But what if my judgments are wrong?" They might be wrong. Like everyone's judgments, yours will always be inexact because you don't know the future. You can't always be certain whether your perceptions and calculations are correct. Every day, you're essentially making bets. When you pick a daycare, you can't be 100% certain that the staff won't beat your kids. When you buy a house, you can't be 100% sure it won't collapse next year. You can use your critical thinking and research skills to get to whatever level of certainty is necessary and reasonably attainable for that decision—maybe you'll be 90% or 95% or 99% sure—but you probably won't get to 100%.

Here's something to consider: how do you think critically about important things that *don't* make you anxious? Let's say hurricanes aren't a very anxious topic for you. You don't find yourself ruminating for hours about them. They're scary and could harm you and your family, but you don't find yourself trying to escape from the fear with mental compulsions. You need to decide how to prepare for hurricane season. I'm guessing…

- You make decisions about the topic fairly quickly, without going back and forth for hours
- You stop thinking about the topic when you're not getting any new information
- If you don't have all the information you want, you either wait for that information to arrive or decide to move forward without it
- You're able to tolerate some level of risk that you're making the wrong decision while taking action anyway
- Even if you *could* get a tiny bit more certainty by thinking about the topic more, you don't, because it doesn't feel worth it to you

You need to learn to think this way about topics you *are* anxious about. These topics aren't fundamentally different from non-anxious topics. They're not any more important or life-changing than the thousand other important, life-changing decisions you make in a given year. They just happen cause you more fear. But you're capable of tolerating uncertainty about anxious topics, just as you tolerate uncertainty about whether you filed your taxes correctly or what food to buy for your pets (assuming these aren't anxious topics for you).

A few more things that might help you justify disengaging from mental compulsions:

1. Your distress level is not a good indication of how important a thought is. Intrusive thoughts are loud. They grab your attention and make you feel like disengaging with that thought is a life-

threatening mistake. But the "loudness" of a thought doesn't necessarily mean anything about how relevant or true that thought is. Fear is not danger.

You probably know this intuitively from hearing about other people's fears. Do you have a relative who won't go near your tiny, harmless dog, even after you've explained that Popples is a 15-year-old toothless Bichon who won't even wake up if you pet her? Have you ever attended an OCD group and thought, "Man, my thoughts are intense, but at least I'm not afraid that hearing the song 'Love Shack' is going to cause me to lose control and kill my family"? This is probably true of some of the thoughts you have, even if they're based on real-life possibilities.

2. Mental compulsions are probably not helping you as much as you think they are. They are probably not the most efficient way of dealing with a problem, even if that problem is real. Can you imagine your driver's ed teacher saying, "To ensure you're driving safely, check your mirrors every five seconds and pray silently the entire time you're driving"? Have you ever attended an anti-racism workshop where the instructor said, "Not being racist is simple: just constantly stay vigilant every time you're talking to friends of a different race so you don't accidentally shout a racial slur at them"? Would your religious leaders say, "The only way to be a good, moral person is to obsessively inventory your thoughts every time you have a passing thought about doing something bad"?

Mental compulsions are tempting. It's easy to be persuaded that they're working to make sure the worst doesn't happen, especially if that outcome hasn't happened. (Remember that episode of *The Simpsons* where Lisa tried to reason with Homer—who was convinced the neighborhood bear patrol was doing a good job because there were no bears around—by saying she had a rock that could keep tigers away?) But it's likely that if you disengage, you'll find that they weren't helping you as much as you thought they were.

"Lisa, I'd like to buy your rock."

3. Compulsions are not worth the tradeoff. It's actually possible that engaging in compulsions—mental or physical—could help you someday. A lot of the fears people with anxiety and OCD have are about real things that could potentially happen. I've accidentally left my oven on before, and if I were checking it every ten minutes, I probably would have realized sooner. If you obsessively go through your hotel room for hours before checkout to make sure you haven't left anything, at some point, you might actually catch yourself almost leaving something important behind.

So why not perform mental compulsions? Not because intrusive thoughts are never right, and not because they'll never help you. It's because they're making you miserable. They're not a good life strategy.

Overall, are your friendships any better if you engage with every "what if your friends hate you" thought? Sure, thinking and planning for hours about what you'd do if your house caught on fire could someday save you—but what do you give up by doing that? Can you enjoy being on a date when you feel like you have to mentally answer the question, "What if I'm not attracted to my date, but instead want to have sex with my mother?" over and over?

Compulsions have costs. (That includes the cost of trying to figure out whether something's a "real" or "true" thought, by the way.) You're probably living with those costs right now. Are they worth it? Have they brought you closer to the things you value?

so there's no way to be sure whether i should pay attention to a thought?

Nope. You have a lot of thoughts. Some are relevant, and some are not. You can use your judgment skills to make a pretty good guess about whether you need to do something about that thought, but you probably won't attain certainty about whether it's a relevant thought. You'll have to make a spur-of-the-moment guess.

That said, here are some indications that you might be engaging in mental compulsions:

- You find at the end of an hour that you're no closer to making a decision or coming to a conclusion about a topic
- It's a topic about which you've never attained a satisfying amount of certainty
- You feel anxious or tense when you're thinking about that topic
- You find that the amount you think about a topic is driven by the amount of fear you're feeling about a given intrusive thought, not the actual relevance of that topic to your life
- You find yourself thinking about this topic more when you're tired or stressed

One practical way to experiment with the is-it-real-or-is-it-anxiety question is to try disengaging with intrusive thoughts for an hour, a day, or a week. Most anxiety themes aren't that urgent. If you're worried about whether you really love your spouse or whether you have cancer, a week probably won't make a difference. You might find that you feel a lot better and think a lot more clearly about these topics when you haven't been engaging with intrusive thoughts for a while.

i'm still having trouble with the technique part of things. do you have any metaphors that could help me?

Yes. That is basically my entire job as a therapist. Here's one I use all the time: the Annoying Party Guest.

You've decided to host a party. Unfortunately, one of your friends didn't get the memo about plus-ones and brought someone you hate. He's loud and obnoxious and has stupid opinions.

But you can't seem to get this guy out of your house. You kicked him out for a couple of minutes, but he snuck back in through the window with three of his equally obnoxious friends. You argued with his dumb opinions, but he just argued more loudly. You covered your ears and he shouted at the top of his lungs. You even tried giving in to his demands—"Fine, it's easier to just go out and buy the kind of margarita mix he likes instead of dealing with his bullshit"—but that just made him louder and more demanding.

How do you get rid of him? You stop trying. This may sound like a bad deal for you, but you know that what you've been doing to get rid of him or control his behavior isn't working. In fact, it's been making the problem much, much worse. Right now, he's jumping on your bed because you told him to take his shoes off. Your only hope is to make his presence less bothersome and try to enjoy the party anyway.

So you stop arguing with him. You stop trying to get him out of your house. You stop giving into his demands. You enjoy the party while he's there in the background, blathering away about how lizard people control the government. You've got other guests to attend to. He may be obnoxious, but he's one of many people at your house today, and you don't need to give him all you attention. He's still annoying, but it's not as bad as when you were engaging with him. Eventually, he wanders off to ruin a different party. Maybe he comes back to your parties now and then, but you find that he leaves faster and annoys you less when you just let him do his thing.

how can i learn more about mental compulsions and practice these skills?

Here's some further reading on mental compulsions:

- *The Worry Trap* by Chad LeJeune, Stephen Hayes, and Lyle Blaker (book)
- *Getting Over OCD* by Jonathan Abramowitz (workbook)
- "How to Stop Ruminating" by Michael J. Greenberg (web site), available for free at https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/how-to-stop-ruminating/