

Scrupulosity

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The term scrupulosity was unfamiliar to me until a few years ago when I began treating clients, patients, or fellow travelers (depending on the school you graduated from) for this particular mental health disorder. Scrupulosity is not an official mental health diagnosis, but it is a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that centers on religious or moral obsessions. According to the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), to meet the clinical diagnosis of OCD, the client must present with obsession, compulsions, or both. The symptoms must be time-consuming and cause significant clinical distress in various areas of functioning. [Note: This is an abbreviated summary of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for OCD.]

Concerning the OCD subtype of scrupulosity, Miller and Hedges (2007) define it as “a psychological disorder primarily characterized by pathological guilt or obsession associated with moral or religious issues that is often accompanied by compulsive moral or religious observance and is highly distressing and maladaptive” (p. 1042). Pollard (2010) stated that “Scrupulous individuals are overly concerned that something they thought or did might be a sin or other violation of religious or moral doctrine” (p. 1). Pay close attention to the phrase “overly concerned.” Also, notice the words “might be a sin.” Pollard’s point was not to remove sin’s reality or the need to experience concern over a transgression. However, he pointed out that the person experiencing scrupulosity is overly concerned that they may have sinned.

Let me try to illustrate scrupulosity. To be clear, this is not an illustration from a client case. Chad thinks he may have told a lie to Heather. Chad convinced himself that he was a liar and that the so-called lie he told Heather would bring others pain. Chad now believes he is going to hell.

Chad has never been a liar. His value system is not congruent with lying. However, his intrusive thought, “I am a liar,” is now an obsession. Chad goes through the compulsion of ritualistic prayers every few hours [maybe even minutes] to ask God for forgiveness for telling lies. He may go through this mental ritual in private or even while you are having a conversation with him. He is fixated on his perceived sin, and he must repeat his prayers for forgiveness for momentary relief. Chad is in agony. His mind is torturing him, and he cannot control it.

It is difficult, and maybe even impossible, to overcome scrupulosity by oneself. It is not the same as having a little anxiety. It is a mental illness that requires the help of a trained professional. Like other forms of OCD, one helpful treatment for scrupulosity is exposure and response prevention therapy (ERP) (Jebelian, 2020). I find it a helpful strategy in treating different anxiety-based disorders.

If you or someone you know is struggling with scrupulosity, search your area for a qualified mental health professional. Here is a suggestion, search for a therapist specializing in treating OCD using the effective ERP treatment method.