

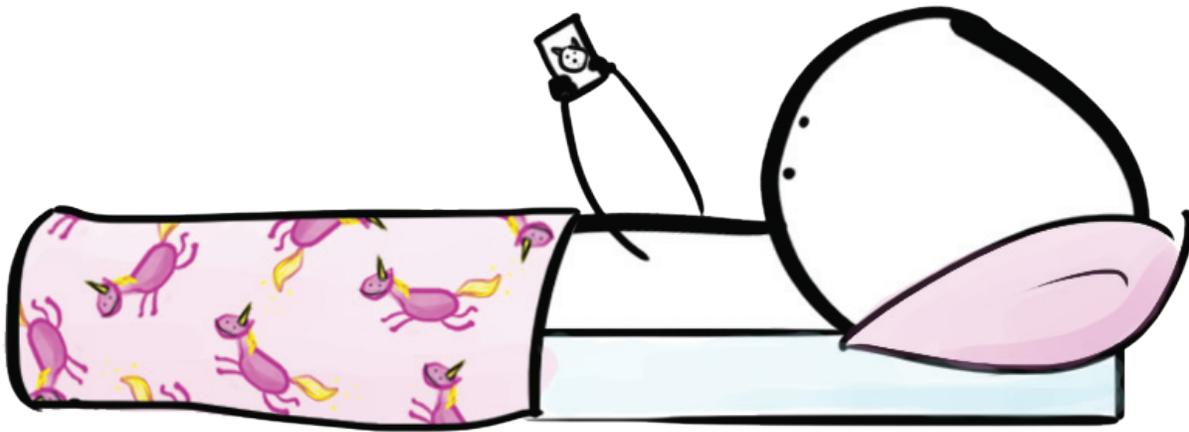
10 THINGS YOU CAN DO THIS WEEK (AND NEXT WEEK)

by MARK FREEMAN

OCD IS SO MUCH BIGGER THAN OCD.

It can seem like there's a ton of difficult work to do when you're starting therapy to recover from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. And I don't want it to seem like I'm adding to that work, but you'll need to change much more than the things you've identified as OCD. The great thing is, you can make those changes while you live your life. In fact, living your life is how you make those changes.

What I've included here are some exercises and concepts that I found useful for practicing skills that helped with recovery. They helped me learn how to make changes so I could do the things I wanted to do in life. This is not therapy or a replacement for therapy. These exercises will help you develop skills that support personal change as you handle whatever your brain throws at you.



DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN THE MORNING

Maybe the first thing you do when you wake up isn't something you see as part of OCD, but do you have the skills to change it?

Change is tough, for anybody, even when everything is going great. So making the changes involved with cutting out compulsions and overcoming OCD can be excruciatingly tough.

One way of helping yourself with that process is to practice change in other areas of your life. By learning the skills necessary to make a simple change in your life and push back against the pressure of habit, you can better prepare yourself to handle change when your brain pummels you with anxiety missiles and intrusive thought bombs.

To get a better understanding of how you handle change, try to change something in your morning. Get up at a different time, prepare your breakfast the night before, don't pick up your phone. . . Experiment!

- Make a change in your morning routine with something you wouldn't necessarily associate with OCD.
- Explore how your brain reacts. What does it do? Why does it do that? What's difficult?
- What supports do you need to succeed with this change?



LET SOMETHING DROP

You're absolutely right. If you don't take care of that super-important thing, it'll fail. Bad things will happen. You can handle them.

When we struggle with OCD, we often take on more responsibility than we can handle. We try to stop every bad thing from happening. We often see ourselves as the responsible one. We stay late to make sure things get done right. We spot the problems that others miss. It's part of our identity. We can balance ALL of the dishes.

But moving ahead with recovery and life will mean focusing your time and energy on the things that actually matter to you. Trying to prevent bad things from happening isn't the same as doing the things that will actually make you happy in life. It's time to learn how to let things drop. Admit failure on a project, tell somebody you can't help them like you promised, ask for help for yourself, say no. Sticking to your values will mean setting boundaries. Practice trusting yourself to handle any outcome.

- Consider your values and what's most important to you in life.
- Look at how you're spending your time and energy.
- Set boundaries and say no to things that don't align with your values.



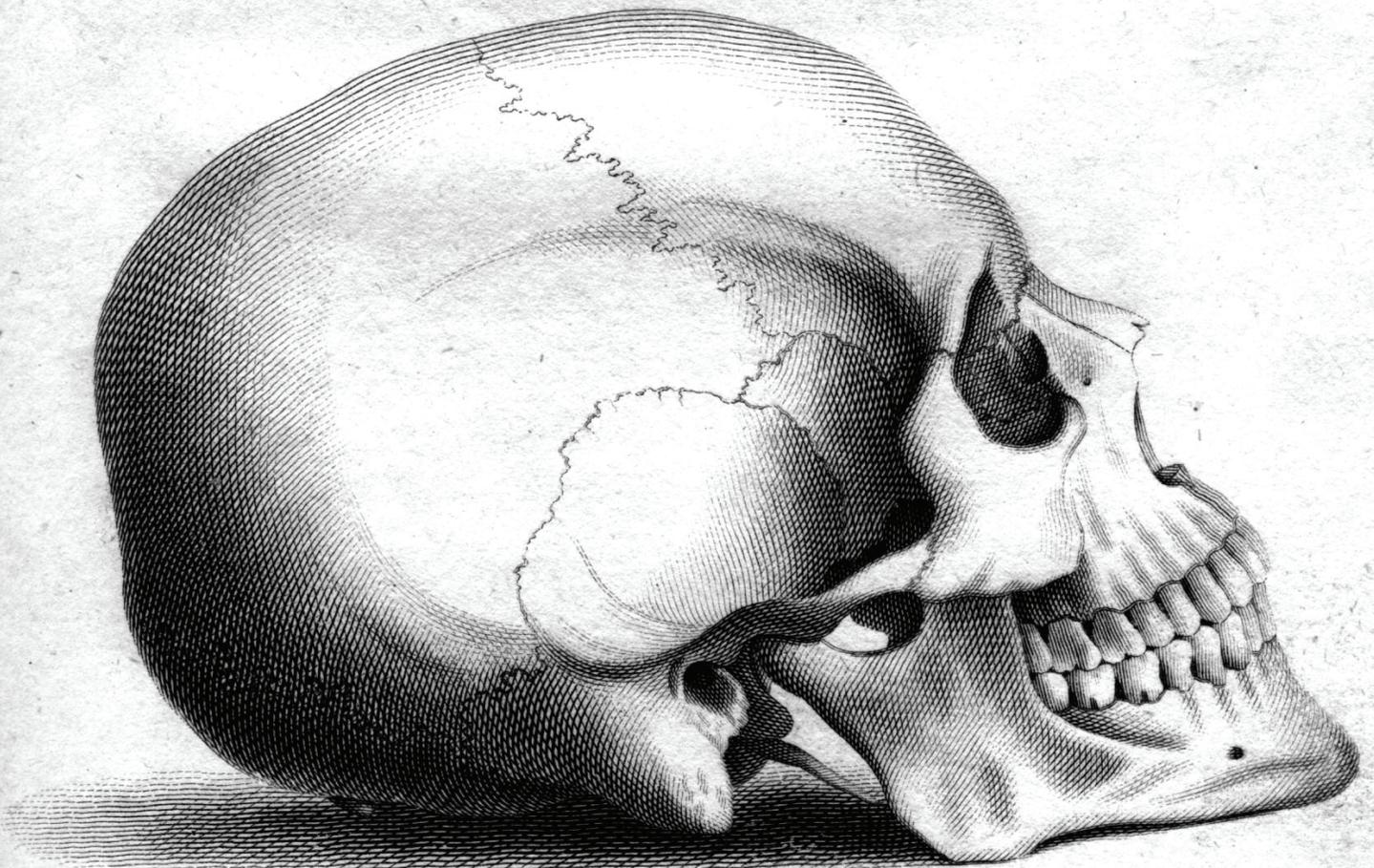
PREP REAL FOOD FOR YOURSELF

What does planning and preparing meals for the week have to do with getting over OCD? Everything.

This actually isn't about eating healthy. You can do that if you want. But you could also prepare the most incredible fried chicken six-cheese ranch dressing mac 'n cheese. The point here isn't so much the food as the things you'll need to do to make the food: planning meals, taking time to buy groceries, budgeting, learning how to cook, etc.

When we're struggling, taking care of ourselves diminishes in priority as we react to each new crisis our brains throw at us. Committing to meal prep is proactive. You'll reduce unnecessary uncertainties—What am I going to eat for lunch today? Do I have enough money to buy another restaurant meal?—while giving yourself a valued direction to move in when your brain throws up another crisis. Yes, you could spend another hour on social media, but you need to go to the grocery store right now.

- Make time to buy groceries and cook food for yourself.
- Practice accepting the stuff in your head and cutting out compulsions to stick to your meal preparation plan.
- Enjoy this time and energy you're investing in yourself.



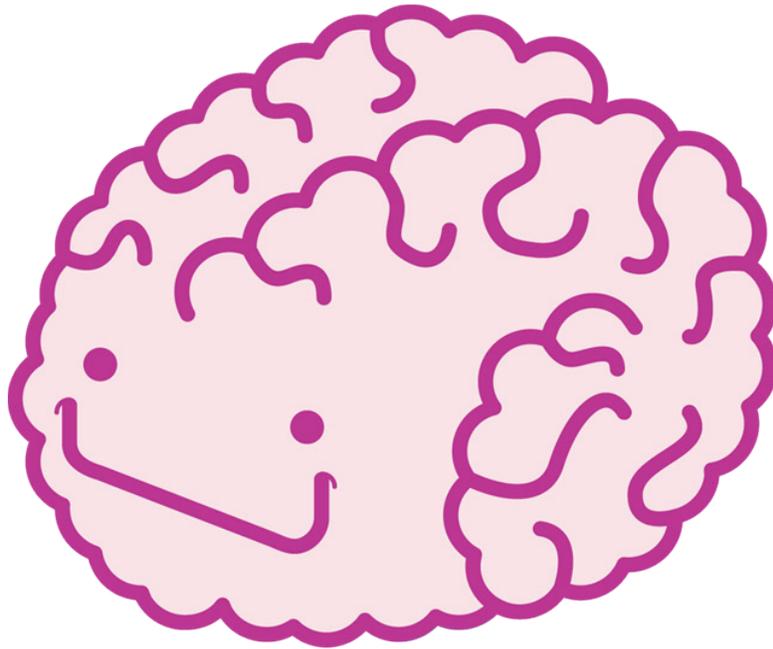
Be open to changing your beliefs about death.

You'll die, I'll die, and lots of people around us—probably all of them—will also die. If you want to live, you'll need to get ready to get comfortable with that.

Reacting to fear about death is no different than reacting to any other thing that might scare you. As you cut out compulsions and accept uncertainties, it's inevitable that you'll come up against death. There are likely many beliefs and judgments about death that you've picked up over the years. They may not be serving you so well.

It's a challenge to shift your perspective on anything, let alone death. So especially if you're just getting started on recovery, simply begin to be aware of your reactions to death. Notice beliefs you hold about death. Be curious about them. Are they useful to you? Are they getting in your way? Do they help you live your life?

- Be aware of your beliefs and judgments connected to death.
- Be curious and critical about them.
- Open up to the possibility of shifting perspectives and getting comfortable with uncertainties about death that affect you.



MAKE YOUR BRAIN SQUIRM

That squishy ball of mush in your skull has tormented you long enough! It's time to put yourself back in charge of your life, even if your brain hates it.

Cognitive defusion is about recognizing that your thoughts are separate from you. One way you can practice it is by seeing your brain as this separate beast that's hanging out with you, shouting things at you. When we're deep in OCD, we react to everything the beast shouts at us. We believe it. If the beast gets upset, we quickly stop what we're doing and instead do something that makes the beast happy. But this leads us way off-course in life.

Now it's time to do the things you want to do. Make that beast freak out. Take it places it doesn't want to go. Do things it believes are impossible. Find the everyday activities that make the beast squirm and savour them. Practice doing them even more when the beast would much rather you fall back into an old compulsion.

- Recognize that you're separate from the beast in your head.
- Do things you value that the beast doesn't want you to do.
- Love making that beast squirm. Take it as a positive sign that it's throwing even more anxiety tantrums. Revel in it.



WRITE SOMETHING IMPORTANT IN A BUSY PLACE

Oh, yes, you'll be distracted and annoyed. Maybe you'll be anxious. Maybe you'll write the worst mistake-ridden piece of unintelligible junk you've ever written!

Adapt this to whatever makes sense for you. It's about doing something important, in a place where you'd normally not do that, and then publishing that thing without reviewing it. Publish a blog post without proofreading it. Send a text to your crush without spending an entire day ruminating on it. Quickly write and send an important question to your boss while you're crammed on transit.

This gives you the opportunity to work on focus—things around you distract you from what you value in the same way that the stuff in your head can. Work on accepting both. Avoidance is avoidance. This also gives you the chance to cut out seemingly “normal” checking and controlling compulsions we like to engage in. Be mindful of what you're writing so rereading is unnecessary.

- Go to a place where you typically wouldn't write something important.
- Practice writing mindfully.
- Publish or send it without any checking. Accept whatever uncertainties pop into your head.



GET SKILLED AT USING YOUR REVERSE COMPASS

You know how your brain keeps coming up with rational reasons to engage in compulsions and that keeps pushing you back into the OCD hole? Well, why do you listen to your brain?

Developing your reverse compass is about being honest with yourself. It's about recognizing how you always end up in places you don't want to be. It's about learning the patterns of how your brain works so that when your brain is telling you that something is true, you know that means that the opposite is actually true. In some situations, your brain will always say you're going north when you're really going south.

This takes some work to figure out. It's not that our brains are always wrong. But as you get started on the journey of recovery, be open to exploring how your brain will consistently misinterpret experiences. Once you recognize that, it'll be a practice of doing things you value even when you rationally and reasonably believe you should be engaging in a compulsion.

- Look for patterns of thinking that seem reasonable but always lead you into relapse.
- Use that understanding to step towards your values even when you're convinced you're going in the wrong direction.



STOP MEASURING SUCCESS BY DEFEATING ENEMIES

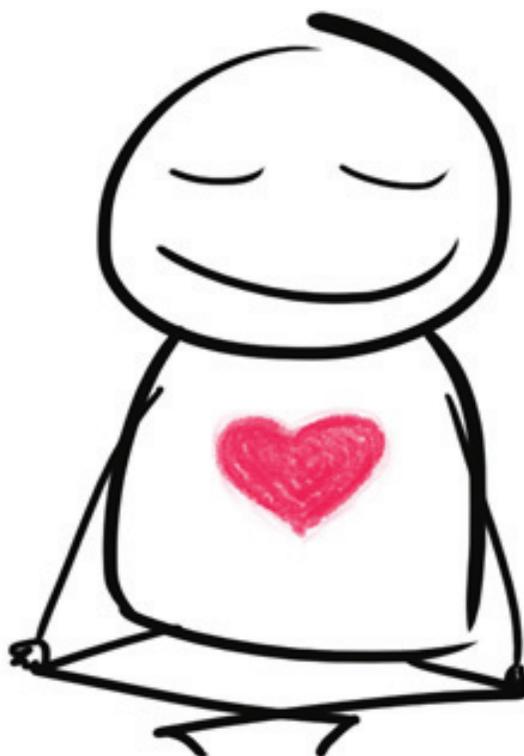
If your goal is to cut out compulsions, get rid of intrusive thoughts, and defeat OCD, what are the three things you'll definitely need to do that?

The problem with measuring success by defeating enemies or pinning your happiness to it, is that you'll always need new enemies if you want to sustain success and happiness. You're committing yourself to a never-ending battle.

At first, with any mental illness, when we're in distress, it might make sense to fight against it. But as quickly as possible, it's useful to shift the focus away from the illness and towards the things you want to spend your time and energy on in life. Focus on what you want to build and create. Build your identity around those things.

You don't need to invest more of your life in something you don't even want in your life.

- Identify the things you actually want to build and create in life.
- Put your time and energy into those things instead of making OCD the focus of your life. You can walk off the battlefield and live.
- Build your identity around something you'll keep in your life.



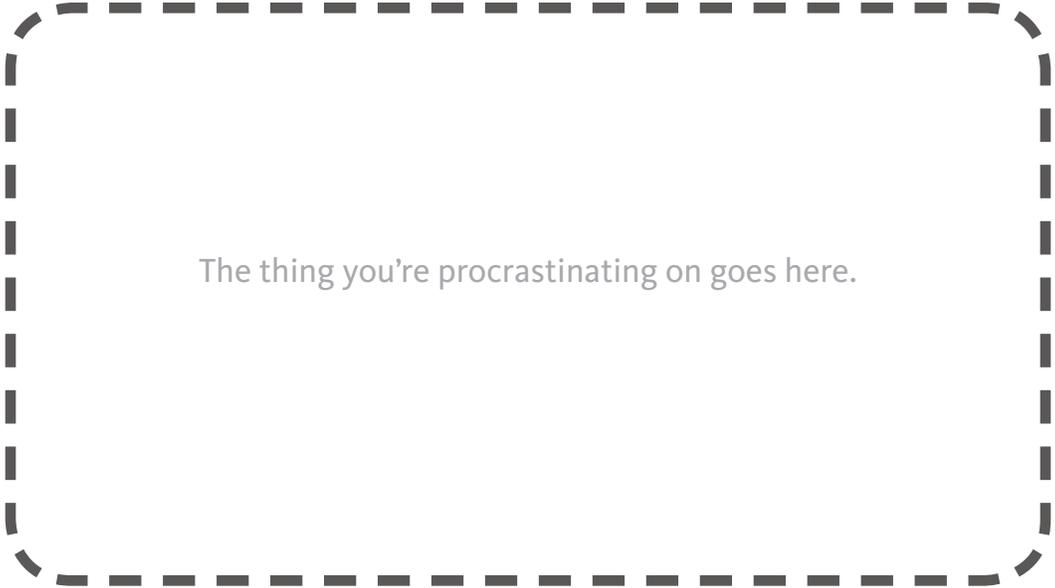
PRACTICE FEELING GRATITUDE FOR EVERYDAY THINGS

Things or people that have done nothing for you and will not enrich your life in any way are perfectly wonderful targets for gratitude.

When you hear people talk about things like gratitude journals, they're usually talking about identifying "good" things and being grateful for them. But you'll find that a brain struggling with OCD has a clever way of always adding up more things that were "bad" than were "good". Or it'll remind you that all of the good things today don't make up for that horrible thing you might have done in the past that you can't disprove.

So you may find it far more useful to practice gratitude with everything. You can be grateful for the chair you're sitting on, the air you're breathing, the thought your brain just threw at you, that thing that happened at work, the sounds you hear, the itch behind your ear. When you understand how to practice gratitude in any moment, with anything, you'll discover a bottomless well of enjoyment.

- Stop trying to judge the things you can or can't be grateful for.
- Practice being grateful for anything. Try being grateful to your nose right now.



The thing you're procrastinating on goes here.

DO SOMETHING YOU'VE BEEN DELAYING

In fact, this week is the 100% perfect time to do that thing you're always thinking about but never actually do.

From years of chasing the little hits of relief and certainty we get from engaging in compulsions, we get hooked on solving problems. As much as we say we hate anxiety, we also purposefully keep creating problems to manage. Procrastination is one of the ways we do this. We make anxiety and pressure necessary for action. Imagine living without that. How would you feel if that anxious mental to-do list was totally empty?

Pick one of the things you've been procrastinating on, something you always remind yourself you need to do. It might only be an email that you keep telling yourself you need to send, or maybe it's some financial stuff you've been avoiding because money makes you anxious. Do it this week. Free up that space in your head. You don't have to think about it again.

- Pick something you've been procrastinating on and often think about.
- Do it.
- Don't wait for anxiety and panic to guide your actions.

ENJOY!

You can learn more about Mark's work at www.markfreeman.ca

Some credits: The London Underground image is from Flickr user slipstreamjc. The painting of that war scene is "The Battle of Grunwald" by Jan Matejko. The skull etching was made by a group of people who all look like that now. And the photo of those dishes was snapped by an anxious home cook.

