

## Faulty Beliefs

### Overestimating Risk, Harm, and Danger

- "I must protect myself (or others/loved ones) even if there is only the remotest chance of something bad happening. A tiny, one-in-a-million chance of something bad happening is exactly the same as a huge, 99.999 percent chance of something bad happening."

### Black-and-White or All-or-Nothing Thinking

- "If I'm not perfectly safe, then I'm in great, overwhelming danger."
- "If I don't do it perfectly, then I've done it horribly."
- "If I don't perfectly protect others from harm, I'll be severely punished."
- "If I don't perfectly understand everything I read, it's as if I don't understand anything."

### Overcontrol and Perfectionism

- "I must maintain absolute control over my thoughts and actions, as well as control over all the circumstances that occur in my life. Unless I do everything perfectly, it is intolerable."
- "Extreme harm and danger can come to me, my loved ones, or innocent others if I don't protect them perfectly."
- "If it doesn't look or feel 'just right,' it's intolerable."

### Persistent Doubting

"Maybe I . . .

- wasn't careful enough and therefore something bad will happen
  - harmed/molested/injured/cheated someone
  - stole/plagiarized/did something improper/immoral/bad
- "... even though it makes no sense and doesn't agree with the facts."

### Crystal Ball or "What if?" Thinking

"In the future, what if I . . .

- do it wrong?"
- get AIDS?"
- am responsible for injuring someone?"

## Magical Thinking

- "Thoughts are very powerful. Merely thinking a bad, horrible thought will certainly cause something horrible to happen."

## Superstitious Thinking

- "By doing my ritual (washing, tapping, repeating, touching, spinning, etc.), I can ward off bad things from happening to me and protect those I love."
- "There are bad numbers and good numbers. Bad numbers cause bad things to happen and good numbers cause good things to happen or they can stop bad things from happening."

## Thought/Action Fusion (Similar to Magical Thinking)

- "If I have a bad, even a horrible thought about harming someone, it feels just as if I've actually done it."
- "If I think about something bad happening, I'm implicitly responsible should it actually happen."

## Overimportance of Thoughts

- "If I have a bad thought, it means I'm bad, dangerous, or crazy."
- "My thoughts are the true indicator of who I am, and what I'm likely to do."
- "I'm judged as much by my thoughts as for what I actually do."

## Intolerance of Uncertainty

- "I must be 100 percent certain of everything, and I must be 100 percent sure that everything will be 'alright.' If I'm the slightest bit uncertain about *anything* (my future, my health/loved ones' health), it is intolerable and I must do something, anything, to be certain that everything will be alright."

## Catastrophizing

- "An open sore on my arm means I'll *definitely* get AIDS if I am around someone I think has AIDS."
- "If I get into arguments with my mother . . . it must mean I'm *definitely* a violent person."

## Overresponsibility

- "Maybe I caused something bad to happen. My failure to prevent it must mean that I'm certainly a bad person."

- "I must always, at all times, guard against making a mistake that can possibly—even remotely—harm an innocent person."

### Extraordinary Cause and Effect

- "Objects have the ability to defy the forces of nature . . . for example, stoves can spontaneously turn on, refrigerators can open, locks can unlock—all without human intervention. Germs and viruses can leap long distances—even across city streets—and thus contaminate me and others."

### Pessimistic Bias

- "If something bad is going to happen, it is much more likely to happen to me or someone I love/care about than to others. This occurs for no other reason than it's me."

### Intolerance of Anxiety

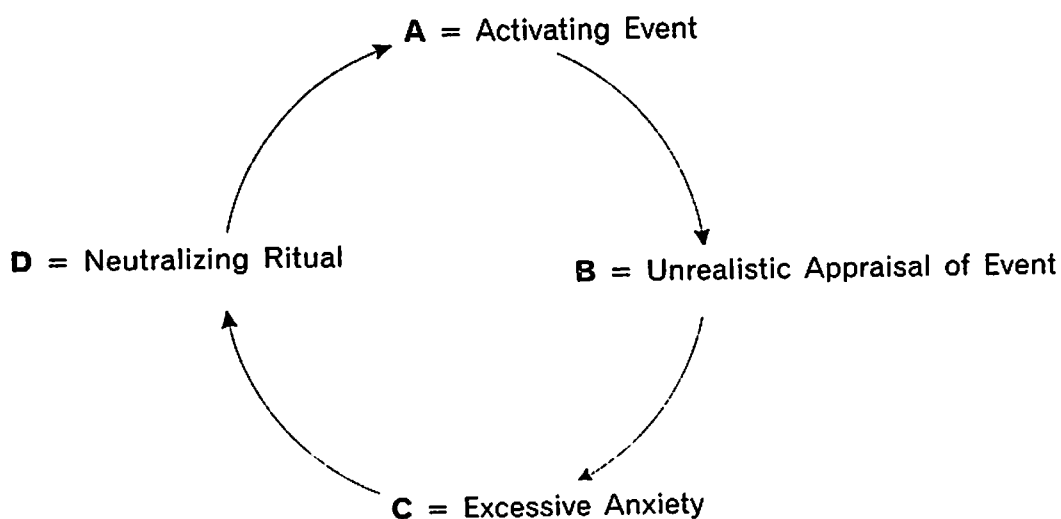
- "I can't stand being anxious for even a short period of time . . . I'll do anything to feel better now."

## The ABCDs of Faulty Beliefs

The role of faulty beliefs in maintaining OCD symptoms can be understood by using the "ABCD Method." This is an adaptation for people with OCD of the original "ABC" method of cognitive therapy used by Ellis (1962) and Beck, Emery, and Greenberg (1985). The anxiety, emotional discomfort, and resulting compulsive behaviors of OCD take place in the following sequence:

### *A: Activating Event*

An event, such as touching a doorknob, checking that the stove is turned off, stepping on a crack, or thinking an embarrassing or horrifying thought takes place.



## B: Unrealistic or Dysfunctional Appraisal of the Event

After the activating event, an automatic, unrealistic appraisal or interpretation of the activating event occurs in a split second, beyond your awareness. This interpretation or appraisal involves an unrealistic sense of impending harm, damage, danger, or catastrophe that could result from the activating event. It causes you to feel extremely anxious. Look at the list of Faulty Beliefs to identify specific types of faulty beliefs. Then, in the Common Faulty Beliefs chart, read the examples of events/situations that typically activate faulty beliefs and their accompanying unrealistic appraisals in those who have OCD.

Common Faulty Beliefs		
A: Activating Event (Situation or event that triggers anxiety)	B: Unrealistic Appraisal (Automatic irrational thought)	Faulty Belief(s) (Choose from the Faulty Beliefs list)
Door didn't sound "right" when I shut it after the twentieth time.	"It's dangerous to leave the house unless the door shuts perfectly. Maybe I'll be blamed if there is a break-in."	Overcontrol and Perfectionism Overestimating Risk, Harm, and Danger Persistent Doubting
Touched doorknob of public bathroom without tissue paper.	"For sure, I'll get catch a horrible disease and die from it."	Intolerance of Uncertainty Overestimating Risk, Harm, and Danger Persistent Doubting
Seeing silhouette of naked child in shower stall.	"What if I enjoyed what I saw? Maybe I'm a child molester." "My bad thought is a sign of an evil seed inside of me."	Magical Thinking Thought/Action Fusion "What if" Thinking Overimportance of Thoughts
Seeing pillows on couch in living room not lined up in perfectly symmetrical order.	"If the pillows are not perfectly straight, something bad will happen to me and my children."	Superstitious Thinking Overcontrol and Perfectionism
Looking in a mirror, making sure every hair is perfectly even.	"I must keep cutting it more and more (for hours and hours) until it looks perfect. If my hair isn't perfect, people will ridicule me."	Overcontrol and Perfectionism Persistent Doubting
Seeing a banana peel on a sidewalk across a busy street.	"I'll be guilty of negligence and punished unless I remove the banana peel and prevent others from slipping and breaking their necks on it."	Overresponsibility Overcontrol and Perfectionism
Switching off light switch	"I must do it five times in a row or something bad will happen to my parents."	Superstitious Thinking Overcontrol and Perfectionism
Twisting the tops of food jars closed, extremely tight.	"I must make sure the top of the jar will not 'fly open' and everything spoil."	Extraordinary Cause and Effect "What if" Thinking Persistent Doubting

## C: Excessive Anxiety

The unrealistic appraisal triggers high levels of anxiety. The feelings of anxiety are, in turn, unrealistically appraised as intolerable, unacceptable, and dangerous. For a person with OCD, the anxiety spins out of control. There is a powerful urge to relieve that anxiety however possible.

## D: Neutralizing Ritual

A compulsive action or set of actions such as excessive washing, checking, and ordering brings the anxiety under control for a while, until the next activating event occurs.

## Correcting Faulty Beliefs

*Cognitive restructuring* is the technical phrase for the process of directly challenging the faulty beliefs that underlie OCD behaviors. This process doesn't make you stop your dysfunctional thinking. Rather, it helps by encouraging you to become a better, calmer, more mindful observer of your own thoughts. Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz (1996) refers to this aspect of our mind as "the impartial spectator."

## Cognitive Restructuring—Some Caveats

It is important to mention here that while cognitive restructuring is a highly useful tool for correcting the faulty beliefs that maintain OCD behaviors, it must be used properly to have the most benefit. The following are some rules to consider before trying cognitive restructuring for OCD:

1. Cognitive restructuring is best used to enhance and bolster the effects of ERP, not as a substitute for it. According to Dr. Edna Foa (personal communication), a leading expert on ERP, the best tool for correcting the faulty beliefs of OCD is exposure and response prevention. First, take on the hard work of chapters 4, 5, and 6 before attempting the cognitive restructuring exercises in this chapter.
2. Use cognitive restructuring to help change faulty beliefs that persist when a course of ERP has not corrected these faulty ideas (such as the probability of being contaminated by the AIDS virus, or of burning the house down from not checking that the stove is off).
3. Remember that, as we mentioned in chapter 2, reassuring self-talk, or "mantras," if done habitually to relieve the anxiety of an obsessive thought, can themselves become compulsions. Be careful not to incorporate cognitive-restructuring techniques in a manner that provides reassurance and escape from anxiety. If you find yourself doing this, then hold off on cognitive-restructuring exercises and focus more on exposure and response prevention.

# Cognitive Restructuring—Step by Step

By learning to challenge your automatic beliefs, you make the sequence of obsessions and rituals less habitual and automatic. Challenging your automatic belief system is like throwing gunk into the gears of the well-oiled engine of your OCD thinking. In this way, you will have more control over the impact that your thoughts have upon you and your behavior.

## Step 1. Write Down Your Unrealistic Appraisals and Faulty Beliefs

It is important to know exactly what situations/events activate a specific unrealistic appraisal, and what the actual belief is. Write the activating situation or event in the first column of Your Own Faulty Beliefs Assessment chart. Write the unrealistic appraisal, in your own words, in the second column; and then write your faulty belief in the third column. Refer to the Common Faulty Beliefs chart on page 101 for examples of unrealistic appraisals common to many people with OCD. Often, there is more than one such belief operating for each automatic irrational thought. This exercise will help you to see the various unrealistic appraisals that you make in response to an activating event.

<b>A: Activating Event (Situation or event that triggers anxiety)</b>	<b>B: Unrealistic Appraisal (Automatic irrational thought)</b>	<b>Faulty Belief(s) (Choose from the list on pp. 98–100)</b>

## Step 2. Challenge Your Unrealistic Appraisals with Realistic "Self-Talk"

Now, begin to challenge the unrealistic appraisals of your "OCD brain" by applying more realistic appraisals to these trigger situations. Note that many people confuse this step

with so-called positive thinking. The goal, however, is not to be a "positive thinker," but an "accurate thinker." Accurate thinking means that you identify your OCD-based thoughts and label them as such. Then you can identify the true facts about the situations that trigger anxiety and rituals.

OCD images and ideas can be very strong and are almost always based on negative feelings concerning future harm and danger. The Coping Self-Talk chart below provides ways to fight against your OCD-caused unrealistic appraisals with self-talk strategies designed to help you cope.

<b>Coping Self-Talk</b>		
<b>Faulty Belief</b>	<b>Unrealistic Appraisal (Automatic, Irrational Thought)</b>	<b>Fight Back with Realistic Appraisals (Coping Self-Talk)</b>
Overestimating Risk, Harm, and Danger	"I must protect myself (or others/loved ones) even if there is only the remotest chance of something bad happening."	"I must learn to take a chance in order to get better." "What would a prudent person (someone who didn't have OCD) do?"
Overcontrol and Perfectionism	"I must maintain absolute control over my thoughts and actions, as well as control over all the circumstances of my life. It is intolerable unless I do it perfectly." "If it doesn't look or feel 'just right,' it's intolerable."	"This is so exhausting ... It's hard, but I think I'll take a chance on being imperfect for a change." "I'm afraid of change, but it's just my OCD brain playing tricks on me." "For a change, I'll try being perfectly imperfect."
Catastrophizing Black-and-White, All-or-Nothing Thinking	"Unless I'm sure everything is perfectly safe, I'm certain I or my loved ones are in terrible danger."	"What is and where is the evidence of harm? There is no proof that something bad is inevitably going to happen."
Persistent Doubting	"Maybe I harmed/molested/injured/cheated stole/plagiarized, etc."	"It's my OCD brain playing tricks." "I know logically what's what." "I'm not buying into these dumb messages!"
Magical Thinking Thought/Action Fusion Overvaluing Thoughts	"Merely thinking a bad thought will cause something bad to happen."	"It's only a thought. I am not m thoughts. It's just an OCD thought, and therefore means nothing. Only actions can harm, not thoughts."

Faulty Belief	Unrealistic Appraisal (Automatic, Irrational Thought)	Fight Back with Realistic Appraisals (Coping Self-Talk)
Superstitious Thinking	"By doing my ritual I can ward off bad things from happening to me and protect those I love."	<i>"These rituals are so tiring ... I must take the chance to discover that I can't truly control the outside world this way. My rituals protect no one, and they torment me and those around me."</i>
Intolerance of Uncertainty	"If I'm even slightly uncertain about <i>anything</i> (my future, my health, and the health of my loved ones), it is intolerable"	<i>"I can remain calm in the face of uncertainty. Since I can't control everything, why try? By trying to control everything, I only make my OCD worse." "By not acting upon my need for absolute certainty, the urge to do a ritual will diminish after a while."</i>
Overresponsibility	"Maybe I will cause something bad to happen, and if I fail to prevent it, that will mean that I'm a very bad person."	<i>"I'm only human ... my responsibilities end where others' responsibilities begin." "I can be a 'good citizen' without having to be everyone's guardian angel."</i>
Pessimistic Bias	"If something bad is going to happen, it is much more likely to happen to me or to someone I love/care about than to others."	<i>"The probability of something bad happening to me or my loved ones is no greater than the probability of bad things happening to anyone else. I'm just not so special!"</i>
"What if?" or the Crystal Ball	"What if I ... do it wrong/make a mistake/get cancer/get AIDS/cause someone harm?"	<i>"The torture I put myself through by worrying about the future is certainly worse than anything that could possibly happen. I'll deal with it when it happens." "Living my life in terms of 'What ifs' only wastes my time." "What are the true odds of getting cancer or AIDS, or causing someone harm? The odds are much smaller than my OCD brain wants to believe."</i>
Intolerance of Anxiety	"I can't stand being anxious for even a short period of time ... I'll do anything to feel better now."	<i>"I can handle the discomfort ... I don't have to do a ritual now. My anxiety level will go down if I just wait it out."</i>



## General Principles for Changing Your Anxious Thinking (Self-Statement Training)

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There are several basic principles for self-statement training.

1. First, challenging your negative thoughts does not mean just "positive thinking." You will not need to replace all of your negative thoughts with positive thoughts. Positive thinking is just as inaccurate as negative thinking. Instead, you will examine all of the evidence available to you, in an effort to balance your thinking and interpretations by using a realistic perspective. Sometimes negative events do happen, and therefore, positive thinking can be unadaptive and get in the way of problem-solving. However, negative events probably occur less often than you are predicting, and with fewer negative consequences than you are imagining.
2. Worrisome thoughts and images tend to become habitual and almost automatic. For example, a woman who was treated at our clinic reported that she always made sure that her house was clean and tidy by mid-morning, just in case friends or neighbors dropped by unexpectedly. It was not until she asked herself why it was important to have a "perfect" house that she realized that she automatically assumed that people would disapprove of her if her house wasn't in "perfect" order. Observing your own behaviors will help you to discover your underlying beliefs and assumptions.
3. Finally, although beliefs and self-statement patterns can become habitual, they are not impossible to change. With the right kind of effort and experience, we can change our views and beliefs about the world and ourselves just as we can change our religious beliefs or our language. Of course, this type of change takes practice and effort.

## Beginning to Change Your Anxious Thinking (Self-Statement Analysis)

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As a first step, it is essential to know exactly what it is that you tell yourself in different situations. The more specifically you can describe your thoughts, the easier it will be to correct or challenge your assumptions.

For example, simply stating, "I am worried about my child getting sick," is not specific enough. Instead, ask yourself about the details of the worrisome thought. What do you think might happen if your child were to become sick? Do you think your child might die or be disabled for life? Do

you worry that his or her sickness means that you have failed as a parent? Do you worry that his or her sickness would be unbearable? The following is a description of how a therapist is helping a client, Joan, to describe her thoughts and worries more specifically:

Therapist: You said that you are constantly worried about others watching you at work. What is it that you're worried that they might see? And what leads you to assume that they're watching you?

Joan: I feel like they're watching to see that I'm doing everything that I'm supposed to be doing . . . that I'm not making mistakes.

Therapist: What kind of mistakes?

Joan: Well, for example, typing errors and wasting time retyping letters over and over again.

Therapist: Do you often retype letters over and over again?

Joan: No, actually, believe it or not, I'm a pretty good typist. I guess it's just that I worry that if I did make a mistake, they would see it.

Therapist: And what if they did notice that you made a mistake? Then what?

Joan: Well, I would worry that they might tell my boss.

Therapist: Go on. What next?

Joan: Well, my boss would either keep an eye on me continually or ask me to leave, and then I'd be without a job. I don't want to lose my job.

Therapist: So, the bottom line for why you're concerned that others are watching you is that you could be fired. Anyone who believed that they were about to lose their job would most likely feel some anxiety. We need to examine whether the evidence is consistent with you being fired, such as whether your colleagues really are watching you, what they would actually do if they did notice a mistake, and what your boss would actually do if someone mentioned that you had made a mistake.

As an exercise, choose three to four examples from your Worry Records over the past two weeks. Now, think back to those events, and read the anxious thoughts that you recorded. Can you expand on those thoughts and pro-

vide a more detailed description of what you thought might happen or what you were worried about? Ask yourself the kind of questions that the therapist asked Joan. What, specifically, did you think could have happened? In the following example, Joan describes her worries about her boyfriend, Rob.

When Rob didn't call me last night, I thought it was because he didn't like me anymore, or that I wasn't good enough for him. I thought that it was the end of our relationship, and that I would never see him again. Then I'd have to explain to all my friends what happened. My friends would feel sorry for me, and that would make me feel even worse, because they would think of me as someone who is never going to be in a stable relationship. What is even worse is that I think they might be right. I'm never going to meet someone who really cares for me.

As you can see, Joan is not just worried that her boyfriend doesn't like her, but that she will never meet anyone and that her friends will judge her to be incapable of ever meeting anyone. Notice how Joan assumed the worst and did not consider possible alternatives for why her boyfriend didn't call her. Perhaps he was tired, or upset with her, or out with friends, none of which necessarily means the end of the relationship. Also notice how Joan then extended her worry from the end of this relationship to never having a relationship. That sounds like jumping to conclusions. Similarly, her worry that her friends would judge her poorly if her relationship with Bob ended sounds like another example of jumping to conclusions.

## Judgments of Risk

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Errors in judgment tend to occur whenever someone is in a state of high anxiety. First, we tend to overestimate the likelihood of negative events happening. Second, we tend to view the consequences of negative events as being catastrophic and unmanageable. In short, we think the worst. Of course, as you probably understand by now, this type of error in judgment only increases our anxiety. So, the very first step in correcting your thinking is to recognize that whenever you feel anxious, you are probably overestimating, catastrophizing, or both.

In this chapter, we focus on the first error in judgment, which is to overestimate the likelihood of negative events or jump to conclusions. In the next lesson, we focus on catastrophizing, or blowing things out of proportion. A good example of overestimation was reported in a study in England

some years ago (Butler & Mathews, 1983). The researchers assessed a group of university students one month before and one day before a major exam. Each time, the students were asked to judge the likelihood that they would fail the exam. Interestingly, despite having a full month to study and prepare, many of the students rated the possibility of failure as much higher one day before the exam compared with one month earlier. The students overestimated the chance of failure because they were more anxious the day before the exam.

Overestimating the risk means jumping to conclusions about a particular event, and believing that it will happen, even though the actual odds are very low. From the earlier example, we could say that Joan was not likely to be fired although she felt as if it were a strong possibility. She was overlooking the fact that she was a good typist and other people were probably not evaluating her in the way that she assumed. Similarly, the likelihood that Joan would never meet anyone who really cared for her, or that her friends would judge her incapable of sustaining a relationship, was not supported by the evidence. Joan had just jumped to those conclusions.

Go back to the examples that you chose from your Worry Records over the last couple of weeks. Were any of those episodes of anxiety related to overestimating the likelihood of negative events? Were you judging something to be a high probability, only to find that it did not occur? This will be very apparent if you typically worry about the same thing over and over, yet it has never happened. Have you worried about your children being kidnapped, and how many times has that happened? Have you worried about missing appointments, and how many times has that happened? Have you worried about your neighbors being unfriendly to you because your house was untidy, and how many times has that happened? Have you worried about being fired, and how many times has that happened? Have you worried about your vacations being a total disaster, and how many times has that happened?

### Your Doubts about Probabilities

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Typically, people have several doubtful responses when asked to reconsider the probabilities in this way. However, these doubts only keep the worry going. The following are the most typical doubts:

*"Even though it hasn't happened in the past, it could still happen."* This type of thinking is one of the reasons why repeated disconfirmation (repeated

evidence to the contrary) does not change worrying. For example, Joan may have worried about being fired every day for the past six months, despite the fact that no one has ever told her that she makes too many mistakes, and even though her boss has always given her positive reviews. Why haven't these disconfirming pieces of evidence prevented Joan from worrying about the possibility of being fired? Most likely, it's because she continues to tell herself that, "There is always a first time, and today could be the day."

By believing that "it could still happen," you have thrown out all of the evidence and assumed that the probability of the negative event is high, without any valid reason. By telling yourself that the chance of being run over by a car when crossing the road is one in a million, but today could be that one in a million chance, mentally, you have inflated the chances of yourself being hit for no good reason.

*"Negative events have not happened yet because I have always managed to prevent them. I always keep close watch on my children, I always make sure I get everything done on time, and I am always early for my appointments."* As another example, you might think, "The reason why my neighbors have not rejected me is because my house is always clean." These examples represent the mistaken thought that your worry and anxious behaviors have actually prevented negative events.

Instead of realizing that the negative event is probably not going to happen, the tendency is to assume that the only reason why negative events have not occurred is because of your extra care and worry. Therefore, the extra behavioral cautions that you take convince you that negative events are very likely and must be prevented. In other words, your careful and safety-checking behaviors interfere with learning that your worries may not reflect the true situation. At the very least, you must realize that you do not know what the real risk is because you have never allowed the situation to arise (because you have always taken extra care to ensure that it does not). You can discover the real risks by testing what happens when you do not carry out your usual anxious, safety-checking behaviors. For example, you could test what happens if you do not clean your house before inviting a guest over, or what happens if you arrive exactly on time, or even a little late, for an appointment. This is the focus of chapter 9.

*"But I have had bad things happen to me before, and I don't want anything like that to happen again, so by worrying, I can prepare myself for the worst and be ready for it."* When a negative event has indeed happened (maybe you were fired, or maybe a family member came down with an illness, or

maybe your decision about a new car yielded more problems than you expected), it is important to return to probabilities and ways of coping. First, the fact that a negative event has happened does not necessarily mean that your chances of it happening again, or of other negative events happening, have increased. It is important to realize that negative events happen to everyone, and worrying will not necessarily prevent them from happening to you. Instead, focus on ways of coping when they do occur.

*"Because I think about my children being kidnapped, then they could be kidnapped."* This is called "thought-action fusion," or the tendency to confuse a thought with reality. Obviously, every day, we have many thoughts about different possibilities and events. The occurrence of these thoughts does not mean that they are important or that they will influence what actually happens.

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### What Are the Real Odds?

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The first strategy for dealing with overestimation is to question the evidence for probability judgments. The general format for this strategy is to remind yourself that your thoughts are guesses, not facts, and that your interpretations represent one of many possible interpretations of given object or event. Next, question the evidence for a probability judgment. This involves asking the following questions: What are the real odds of this happening? Has this ever happened before? What is the evidence to suggest that it will not happen? For example, what are the real odds that my neighbors will think I am a slob if my house is not perfectly clean?

Consider all of the facts and evidence before making a prediction about the likelihood of an event. For example, you may think that your boss is upset with you because he did not greet you this morning, and fail to take into account your boss's own stresses. Similarly, you may assume that making a single mistake is catastrophic, and fail to realize that almost everyone makes mistakes occasionally.

Consider whether you are making negative predictions on the basis of a very limited set of past examples. For example, you may assume that you will be criticized for your performance on a particular task at work, when in the past, the reviews of your work were generally positive.

Consider whether you are confusing low probabilities with high probabilities, or acting and feeling as if negative outcomes are certainties, rather than

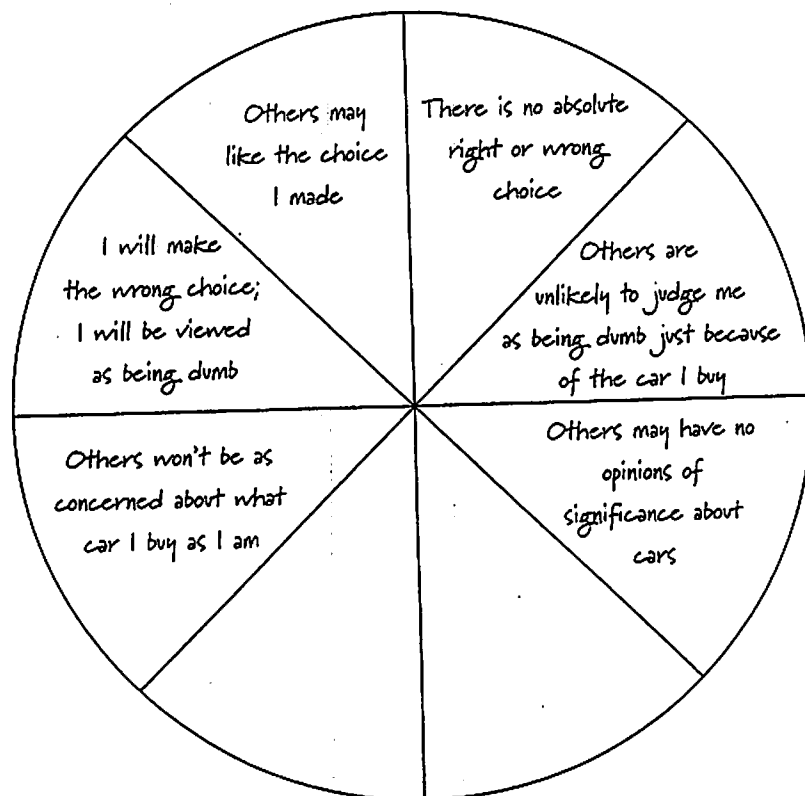
possibilities. Remember, you may be able to list an array of possible negative outcomes, but that does not mean that those outcomes will come true.

The second strategy is to generate alternative interpretations that are based on facts and evidence. Use a pie chart to show alternative interpretations for your particular overestimation. Generate as many interpretations as you can, listing your one initial negative interpretation as one piece of the pie chart, as in the following example, which shows alternative interpretations regarding buying a new car.

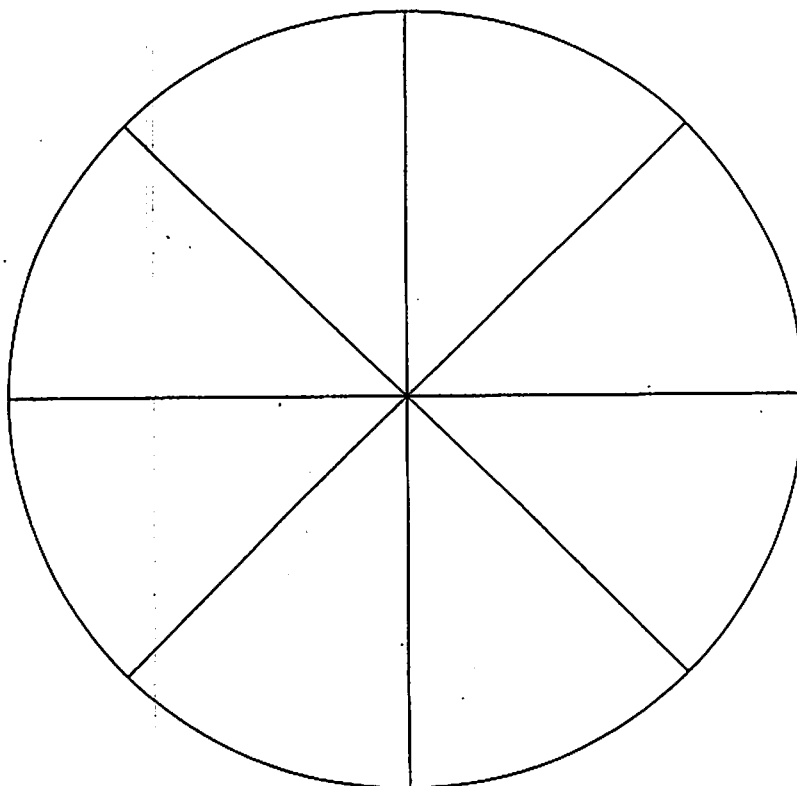
Now, after considering the facts and considering alternative explanations or possibilities (using a pie chart), for the three to four examples from your Worry Records over the past couple of weeks, rate the probability of your initial negative interpretation on a 0- to 100-point scale (0 = it will never happen; 100 = it will definitely happen).

The third strategy for countering probability overestimates is to conduct mini-experiments that will gather data and provide evidence that disconfirms your misappraisals. Experiments are designed in such a way that spe-

#### Pie Chart Example





## Pie Chart



cific outcomes can be tested by the results. It is easiest to use extra-cautious behaviors as a way of testing hypotheses. For example, if you typically call your spouse twice a day to check his or her safety, then the hypothesis to be tested is whether he or she is safe, even if you call only once a day; or if you typically avoid looking your boss in the eye for fear of being reprimanded, then the hypothesis to test is whether you are reprimanded if you look at him directly. The hypothesis being tested is *not* related to the level of emotional distress in a situation (such as how anxious you will feel when you establish eye contact with your boss), but is about independent outcomes (such as the likelihood of being reprimanded). We will be focusing on these mini-experiments in chapter 9.

## Homework



-  Continue to practice relaxation.
-  Continue keeping records of your daily mood and anxiety episodes.



Now that you have some idea about how you might fight your faulty OCD beliefs, try it on your own using the beliefs you wrote down on Your Own Faulty Beliefs Assessment chart on page 103. Make copies of the Challenging Your Faulty Beliefs chart for various activating events and complete it, using the following instructions:

1. Write down an activating event that regularly triggers your anxiety. Choose one event to begin, and then move on to others.
2. Rate the level of your discomfort using the SUDS scale (0-100).
3. Write a description of your unrealistic appraisal of the situation that results in anxiety and discomfort.
4. Using a percent rating of the SUDS scale (0-100%), assess the degree to which you believe your appraisal is an accurate description of the situation (for example, that by counting to 8 six times you will keep your loved ones safe from harm).
5. Then, decide which faulty belief or thinking error you are using to make your appraisal. There may be more than one faulty belief involved, and if you are not sure, that's okay too.
6. Then, write a realistic appraisal using "coping self-talk" that you could apply in this situation to "talk back" to your OCD. You should write the exact words that your "logical brain" comes up with. Use the "Realistic Appraisals" column from the Coping Self-Talk chart above to guide you.
7. Using a percent rating, indicate the degree to which you truly believe in this realistic appraisal *right now*.
8. Repeat this exercise for as many different activating events as you can.

## Challenging Your Faulty Beliefs

Activating Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Discomfort Level (SUDS Level: 0-100): \_\_\_\_\_

Unrealistic Appraisal (automatic irrational thought): \_\_\_\_\_

How much do you believe this appraisal is true? (0-100%) \_\_\_\_\_

Which "Faulty Belief(s)" is/are at work here? (choose from the list above) \_\_\_\_\_

Realistic Appraisal or Coping Self-talk: \_\_\_\_\_

How much do you believe this appraisal is true? (0-100%) \_\_\_\_\_

tively at times of high anxiety at this point would be the same as asking a pilot to make an emergency landing without having practiced all of the emergency procedures. Training is essential, and training in more and more difficult situations will occur over the next few weeks.

## Thinking the Worst

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### Catastrophizing

Earlier, we talked about the basic principles of self-statements and introduced the notion of overestimating the risk, or assuming that negative events are very likely to happen, when in fact, the real probability is low. Overestimating the likelihood of a negative event increases anxiety, because anxiety is a response to the perception of threat or of negative events. We discussed the various ways in which overestimating the risk can continue, despite disconfirming evidence (see the section in chapter 6 that refers to "your doubts about probabilities"). If you do not recall the information from the last chapter, or are confused about the concept of overestimating the risk and how to correct it by questioning the real odds, we recommend that you reread the previous chapter before continuing.

In addition to overestimating the risk, anxiety is associated with a tendency to view impending events with a sense of catastrophe or disaster. "Catastrophizing" means blowing things out of proportion, or thinking the worst. Statements such as, "That would be terrible," "I could not live through that," or "I could never cope with that," give a sense of being unable to cope. Catastrophizing can occur while you are thinking about events that are likely to happen or events that are unlikely to happen. For example, one might catastrophize about others noticing a particular symptom of distress or anxiety that is indeed noticeable, such as blushing or trembling. An example might be, "They will think I'm really weak and incompetent. I would never be able to face them again." This is an example of catastrophizing an event that is likely—a visible symptom of anxiety. Or, one might catastrophize about others noticing a particular symptom of distress or anxiety that is not really noticeable at all, such as an upset stomach. An example might be, "They will know how bad I'm feeling and how uncomfortable my stomach feels, and they'll think I'm a real idiot." This is an example of catastrophizing an unlikely event.

Another type of catastrophizing is jumping to an extreme conclusion from an unimportant event. Some examples are, "If my house is not in perfect order, then I am no good," "If my children argue with each other, then it must mean that I have failed as a parent," and "If I make a mistake at work, then I am not right for this position." This type of catastrophizing is particularly relevant for those who find themselves striving for perfection and worrying about issues of responsibility. Remember, as we described earlier, thoughts such as, "Everything has to proceed in the right way, or something bad might happen," "I must get everything finished on time," and "if I don't worry, then something really could go wrong," result from underlying beliefs that: (1) negative events are indeed very likely, (2) worrying prevents those events from happening, and (3) since you can predict what those events might be, it is your responsibility to be worried and to prevent their occurrence, because failure to do so means that you are neglecting your responsibilities. Through self-statement training, we aim to shift the perception that negative events are likely to occur at any moment, to help you to realize that worrying has no effect on the probability of independent events, and to help you to learn that letting go of worries does not mean that you are irresponsible, because what you are worried about is unlikely to occur in the first place. Responsibility is important only when the event that you are worried about is of high probability. Most of the events that concern people who worry chronically are of low probability. Another underlying belief has to do with a sense of incompetence, or the notion that, "If I make a mistake in my decisions or judgments, then I am incompetent." Sometimes this idea is related to a concern that other respected individuals will recognize our mistakes, whether that person is our boss, a parent, a friend, or a spouse. It is important to recognize that everyone makes mistakes, and in most cases, you are likely overestimating the significance of the mistake.

### **Decatastrophizing**

Decatastrophizing involves imagining the worst possible outcome and then objectively judging its severity. Usually, you will realize that, although the event that you were worried about, if it were to come true, would be unpleasant, nonetheless, it would be manageable and time-limited. This means that you would be able to cope with the event and that the unpleasantness would not continue forever. Although some events may be very unpleasant, and you would not wish them on anyone (such as losing a loved one), the

reality is that there is a way to survive these unpleasant events. It is important to recognize that there is a way to continue, even if the event brings about sadness and struggle. This is a more effective way of managing anxiety about such events than focusing on how horrible the event would be, without further consideration of ways to manage it. Recognizing your ability to cope with negative events involves recognizing alternative solutions to problems, as opposed to continuing to dwell on the catastrophic nature of negative outcomes. Thinking of a negative event as a disaster is very different from thinking of the same event with the realization that you can cope with it. We have to examine the evidence at hand to realize that we usually do cope, in one way or another, even when very negative events happen, such as wars, losing loved ones, or severe illnesses. In fact, great strength and mastery may come out of conditions of real sorrow or threat. This is not to say that all of the events that you worry about will occur. Decatastrophizing is just another strategy for learning to control the tendency to worry excessively about negative events. Decatastrophizing allows you to see that you can cope with negative outcomes that do occur.

Imagine yourself being reprimanded at work for having missed a very obvious mistake in a very important document that resulted in the firm losing a big project. Your boss is obviously disappointed in you. The question is how to manage the situation. The catastrophic approach would be to interpret this situation as a sign that you are incompetent in general, irresponsible in your decision-making, and out of control, and that this mistake represents the loss of all respect from others. The decatastrophizing approach would be to recognize that, while this is a very difficult situation that has had real consequences for your firm, everyone makes mistakes, and the severity of the situation will subside with time. In all likelihood, the people around you will continue to perceive you similarly to the way they perceived you before this event, and if even if they don't, that, too, will subside with time. To make a mistake is to be human, and to be judged negatively by others some of the time is part of everyone's existence.

In most cases, you can handle a worrisome thought by evaluating the evidence to consider the probabilities and by decatastrophizing. For example, let's say that you are worried about making mistakes at work and being fired as a result. You can challenge these thoughts by asking the following key questions: What is the likelihood that I will make a major mistake? What is the likelihood that my boss would fire me if I did make a mistake? And if I did get fired, what steps would I take to cope with the situation? For

example, would you look for another job, seek assistance from friends or family, or take a break from work?

Review the episodes of anxiety that you recorded over the past couple of weeks, and evaluate whether any of your thoughts are examples of catastrophizing, or blowing things out of proportion. In other words, have you had the feeling that an event, if it were to happen, would be unmanageable or terrible?

For each episode of anxiety, question the assumption that the negative event would be a catastrophe. In some ways, you are being asked to say to yourself, "So what if it happens? I can deal with it." Of course, as discussed earlier, some situations are certainly negative, and it is not accurate to say, "It doesn't matter." However, it is important to realize that we all live through bad times, and even if negative events happen, life goes on and you can cope.

### **Putting Catastrophizing and Decatastrophizing Together**

An example of catastrophizing and decatastrophizing with the help of a therapist follows:

**Therapist:** You said earlier that you sometimes worry again and again about the effect that your death would have on your family. Tell me more about this worry.

**Sandra:** Well, I worry because I don't want my kids to go through what I went through, and am still going through, when my father died last year. Besides the horrible sense of sadness they would suffer, who would look after them, and what would happen to them if I weren't around?

**Therapist:** What kind of situation do you imagine if you were to die? What would happen to your children?

**Sandra:** (Teary) It's really hard to talk about because I think it would be so terrible. I see them being alone, and crying, and not knowing what to do.

**Therapist:** These kinds of thoughts are obviously very distressing for you. Let's evaluate them. First of all, let's consider the possibility of overestimating the risk. Do you have any reason to believe that you'll die unexpectedly or soon?

Sandra: Only that my father died suddenly.

Therapist: What was the reason?

Sandra: Apparently, he had a heart condition that we didn't know about.

Therapist: What evidence do you have to believe that you have the same condition?

Sandra: None, actually. I had a complete checkup a few months after he died because I was so worried, and I'm in fine shape.

Therapist: Given the available evidence about your own health and the population statistic for a woman of your age dying unexpectedly for no apparent reason, what is the real probability of that you will die soon? Use the 0- to 100-point scale.

Sandra: When I think of it that way, I suppose it's really low— maybe 10%.

Therapist: So, you're telling me that for every day you live over the next few years, you have a one in ten chance of dying on any given day?

Sandra: (Laugh) No, I guess it's lower than that, probably less than 1%.

Therapist: Okay, now there are other areas where you seem to have made assumptions and overlooked the evidence. Can you think of any?

Sandra: You mean the way my children would feel? I really believe that they would feel terrible.

Therapist: No, I'm not questioning the sadness and loss, but I am questioning your assumption that their lives would continue in that way. Even though it's difficult to think about, imagine what would happen over time, after your death.

Sandra: I suppose that, eventually, things would get back to some kind of normalcy, although not the same as if I were there. Their father is a good dad. He could probably look after them.

Therapist: Again, I want to emphasize that we are not saying that you most likely will die in the near future, or that you should think about it with a carefree attitude. However, realizing that, as difficult as it would be for them to lose you, your children

may be able to survive and continue without you. That's a very different way of looking at the situation. Do you agree?

Sandra: Yes, I understand. I think I tend to do that with a lot of things. I think of the worst and just focus on that, without considering the alternatives.

Notice how this example demonstrates that negative thoughts can become so powerful that reasonable alternatives aren't even considered. Sandra hadn't considered the possibility of her family coping without her; she had only considered how terrible it would be if she were to die. It is important that you give full consideration to alternative ways of coping with future negative events or problems, so that you can interrupt the tendency to worry chronically, without ever reaching a solution or recognizing an alternative. Take the earlier example of worrying about being fired. Even though the probability of being fired may be low, it is important to realize that losing one's job does not have to mean a catastrophe. Looking for another job may not be enjoyable, but it can be done. Another example is the feeling of being overwhelmed and not having enough time to get tasks done. A good way to interrupt this worrisome thought is to ask yourself, "What's the worst that can happen? For example, "What's the worst that can happen if I don't get everything done by the end of the day, or if somebody has to wait until tomorrow? So what if I leave the office without tidying my desk, or leave the house without making sure that it's in perfect order! What's the worst that can happen if I take thirty minutes to relax?" Your response might be, "If I don't get everything done today, it will pile up tomorrow and continue to pile up forever." In reality, there will always be things to be done, and one can never really reach the point of having everything completed. A more effective strategy is to accept the fact that there will always be things to do and to realize they don't all have to get done immediately. In chapter 10, we describe ways to manage work overload.

### **Decatastrophizing Personal Examples**

Go back to each example of catastrophic thinking that you recorded over the past couple of weeks. As objectively as you can, consider the meaning that you gave the event to see where you might be blowing things out of proportion, and where alternatives can be generated. Keep in mind that the goal

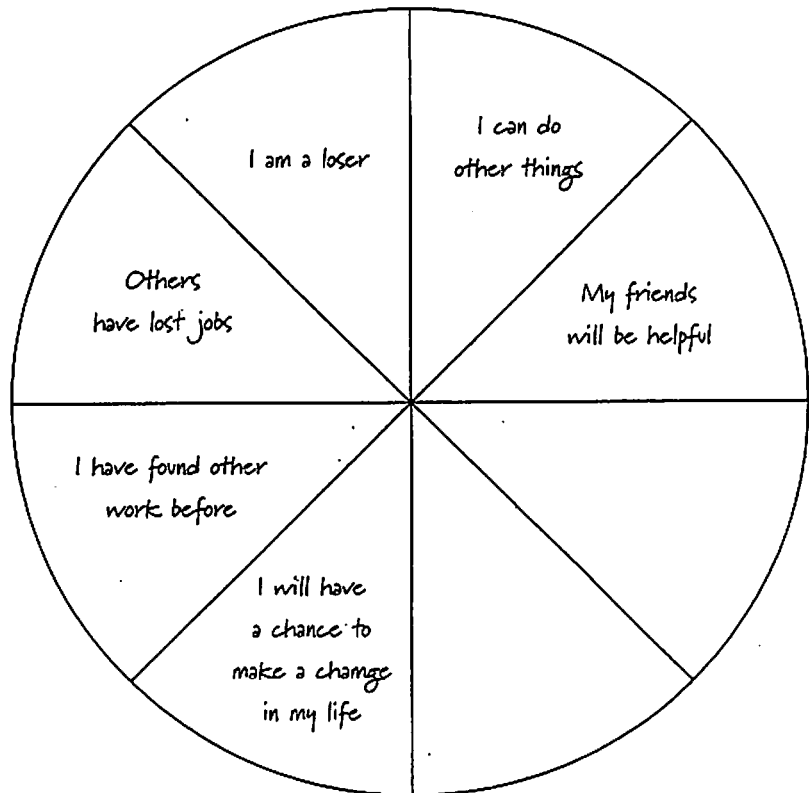
of decatastrophizing is not positive thinking, but a realistic appraisal of possible outcomes.

Just as you used a pie chart to generate alternative interpretations for errors of overestimation, you can use a pie chart to generate alternative meanings of negative events. The following example shows alternative meanings of being fired.

It is important to remember that, decatastrophizing means placing events in perspective, and that means accepting the idea that we cannot prevent all negative events from happening, no matter how much we try. In addition, making mistakes is a normal part of human existence. The error is in blowing errors out of proportion by: (1) viewing mistakes as more significant than they really are, such as viewing our mistakes as a sign of a fatal character flaw or a sign of overall incompetence; and (2) failing to consider realistic ways of coping, should negative events occur.

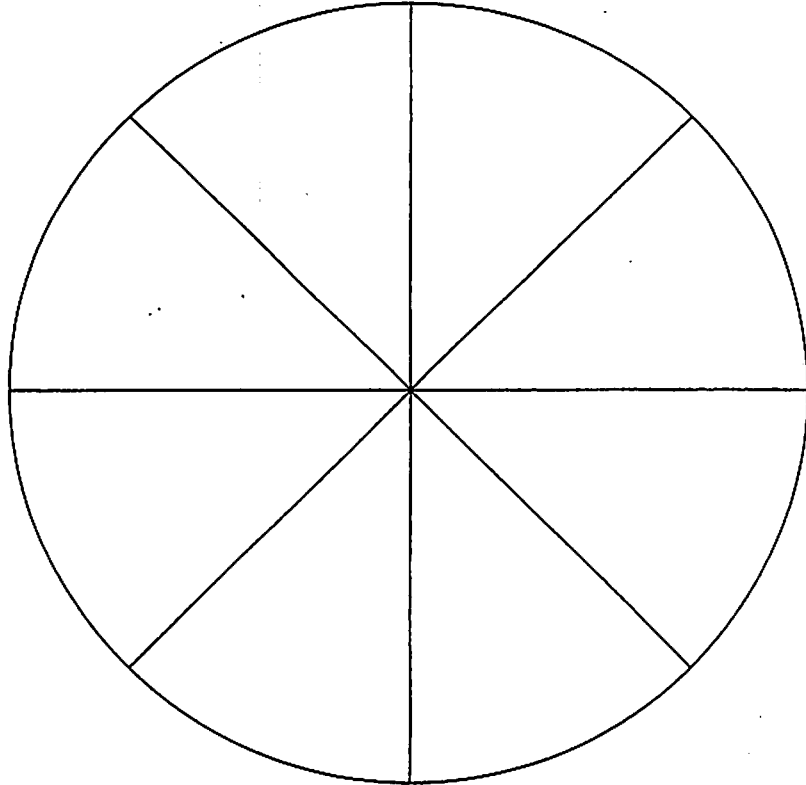
Next, switch gears from focusing on "how bad it would be if it happened" to considering "ways of dealing with it." No matter how intense your fear,

#### Decatastrophizing Pie Chart Example





### Decatastrophizing Pie Chart



you will survive. No matter how distressing the moment, it will pass. So, the final step in decatastrophizing is to generate ways of coping with the event, if it were to happen. Think through what you would do if, for example, you received a negative review at work, lost your job, found out that you made the wrong choice when purchasing a car or house, or lost a child. Remember, you may become more anxious initially, as you face the situation and consider ways of coping, especially if you believe that the negative events are your responsibility. In these situations, the goal is to recognize that: (1) the event is unlikely to occur, (2) you are unlikely to be fully responsible for all negative events, (3) negative events happen to everyone, and (4) there are ways of coping with any event.

In fact, it is likely that, in the past, the intense anxiety associated with these thoughts led you to think desperately about something else, without fully addressing your main fear. For example, the anxiety associated with thinking about losing a loved one may lead you to divert your attention to other worries about less important things. Here, we are asking you to face di-

rectly the events that you are most afraid of, and by facing them directly, to realize that, as negative as they may be, there is a way to manage them. As we discuss in more detail in the next chapter, you will find that thoughts become less anxiety-provoking the more often you face them directly and consider ways to cope.

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### Worry Record—Real Odds & Coping Example

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Date: Friday 15th Time began: 10:00 (A.M./P.M.) Time ended: 11:30 (A.M./P.M.)

Maximum level of anxiety (circle a number below):

0-----10-----20-----30-----40-----50-----60-----70-----80-----90-----100  
None                  Mild                  Moderate                  Strong                  Extreme

Indicate which of the following symptoms you are experiencing:

Restlessness, feeling keyed up or on edge	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Easily fatigued	<input type="checkbox"/>
Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Irritability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Muscle tension	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sleep disturbance	<input type="checkbox"/>

Triggering events: Daughter went out with her friends and has not called

Anxious thoughts: She was in a car accident and is injured and disoriented

Real odds 0-100 3

Alternative possibilities: She is having fun with her friends, she forgot to call, she will call later

Ways of coping: if she is injured, I will help her recover

Anxious behaviors: waited by the phone

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## Additional Challenges to Faulty Beliefs

In the previous section, you challenged your faulty beliefs by changing your self-talk when an OCD thought occurs. This requires consistent practice. Another way to challenge the faulty beliefs of OCD is through the use of "behavioral experiments." These exercises provide an opportunity for you to dispute your OCD predictions of potential harm and catastrophic danger. By testing out the faulty beliefs in the real world, you will further weaken the grip of the faulty belief on your thinking.

### *Thought/Action Fusion and Overvaluing Thoughts*

The following exercises are to be used to test the faulty beliefs that thoughts can cause bad events to occur and that thoughts are the same as actions (Freeston, Rheume, and Ladouceur 1996).

#### Think and Win

Purchase a lottery ticket on Monday and think about winning the grand prize for half an hour every day (the typical odds are 27,000,000 to one). In your mind, create as vivid an image of yourself winning as you can. At the time of the drawing for the big prize, note the outcome. Then, ask yourself, "To what extent did my repetitively thinking these thoughts influence the outcome of the lottery? What was the effect of all my thinking on what actually happened?"

#### Think and Break

Choose an old small appliance (like a toaster) that is known to be in good working order. Every day for one week write on a piece of paper: "The toaster will break." Write it one hundred times and picture it in your mind each time. After one week, examine the outcome. Did your thoughts affect the operation of the toaster?

#### Think Dying Goldfish

Buy a goldfish and a fish bowl from a local pet store. Set it up at home and provide normal, proper care for the fish. For fifteen minutes twice daily, vividly imagine the fish dying. First imagine it gasping. Then imagine it dead and floating on the surface of the water instead of swimming in the bowl. Repeat this every day for a week. Observe the effect on the fish. According to your belief, the goldfish should die because merely thinking something bad causes bad things to happen! Can you alter your rigid belief?

While these "experiments" may sound silly to OCD sufferers and nonsufferers alike, by testing your prediction that your thoughts will cause harm against the outcome, you can begin to challenge your faulty beliefs about the "magical" power of your thoughts.

## Overresponsibility for Harm to Others

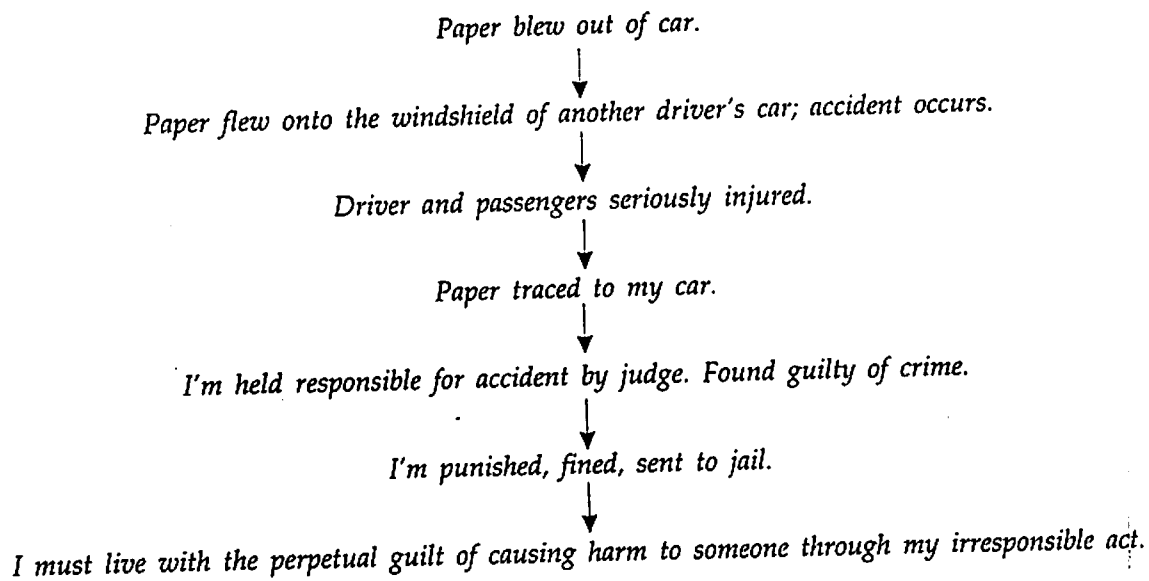
As a person with OCD, you often fail to consider the numerous factors that may contribute to a negative event such as losing your job or the illness of a loved one. Even when it clearly doesn't make sense, you tend to assume the entire burden and responsibility for preventing negative events on your worried shoulders. The "pie technique" is intended to help you attribute responsibility for negative events more accurately and appropriately.

### Pie Technique

To demonstrate the Pie Technique, consider Michael's situation. He has an obsessive concern with the possibility of harming others through his own carelessness. He checks constantly that he has not injured others by acting carelessly; for example, by spilling water on the floor and causing someone to trip and injure himself or herself. He usually keeps his car windows rolled up for fear that something in his car might fly out and cause an accident.

His present obsession is that a piece of paper that *did* fly out of his car window *did* obstruct another driver's view and *did* result in an auto accident. (He had briefly rolled down the window to get some fresh air.) The wind blew a folder on the passenger seat open and a piece of paper flew out. It wasn't an important paper, but it did have his name and address on it.

Now he worries constantly about that piece of paper and the accident it *may* have caused. Sounds silly, doesn't it? Even Michael, an intelligent professional engineer, admits it. Yet, despite the complete lack of evidence of any mishap ever having happened, his OCD-style thinking places his actions as the primary cause of an unfortunate chain of events. This type of thinking ignores all other possible factors that could result in auto accidents, aside from his "carelessness." Using the downward arrow technique, let's look at the sequence of thoughts that make up Michael's obsession:



With Michael's case in mind, do the following exercise to learn how to plot percentages of possible events in order to work on your own faulty assumptions of guilt and responsibility.

1. Describe in detail your obsessive concern regarding your responsibility for the safety of others and the possibilities of their being harmed. In the space below, write a scenario where someone could be injured as a result of your negligence.

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2. Then, try to identify every conceivable factor that could have contributed to the accident, in addition to your contribution.

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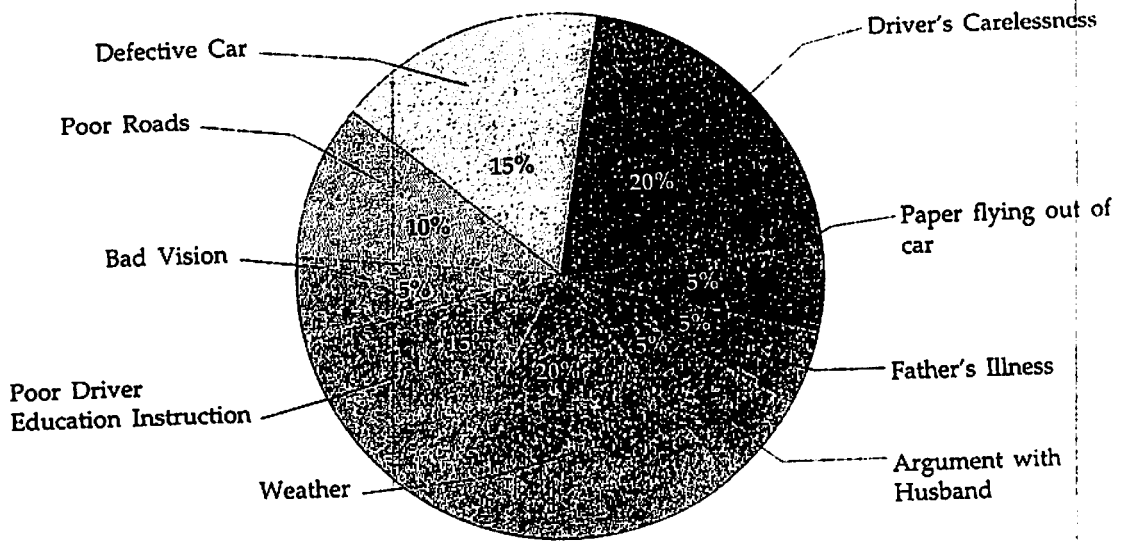
In every mishap, there are a number of factors that could have influenced the cause. For example, in Michael's case, some of the possible conditions that might contribute to an auto accident (in addition to his negligence) include another driver's state of mind (possibly impaired, sleepy, or drunk), the condition of the roads (slippery), the automobile (bad tires or brakes), the weather (dark, wet, or windy), etc.

Following is a chart showing the imagined percentage of other causal contributions to a possible auto accident in addition to Michael's piece of paper flying onto the road (all the various factors are made to add up to 100%):

### Cause and Effect Chart

Possible cause of an accident or mishap	Probability of contribution to an accident or mishap (0-100%)
1. Driver carelessness	20%
2. Defective car	15%
3. Poor road conditions	10%
4. Other driver's poor vision	5%
5. Other driver upset by an argument with spouse	5%
6. Driver emotionally upset over parent's illness	5%
7. Bad weather conditions	20%
8. Poor driving skills—bad driver education	15%
9. Paper flying out of my car, onto road	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

Pictured as a pie chart, all of the competing factors would look like this:



Think of your own obsessive worry that you might harm another, and list all the possible factors that could result in the consequences you fear. For each cause, make an estimate of the percent of the cause's contribution to the overall imagined accident. There are no right and wrong responses. Don't worry if it doesn't add up to 100%—an approximation is fine.

### Cause and Effect Chart

Possible cause of an accident or mishap	Probability of contribution to an accident or mishap (0-100%)
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
<b>TOTAL = 100%</b>	

Now ask yourself the following questions:

1. Based solely on the chart above, if you knew an accident actually had happened, and you knew nothing more about its specifics, what is the *likely* cause of the accident?

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2. What is the evidence for your decision? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Is your decision based on your feelings about what might have happened, or on the "facts"? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What else might have caused the accident/mishap? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Are you certain about your decision? \_\_\_\_\_

6. If you are not certain, how uncomfortable are you with not knowing for sure? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. How strongly do you rate your responsibility for the accident/mishap? (0-100%) \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you rated your responsibility higher than 50%, is this consistent with the facts of the accident/mishap in light of all the other factors that could possibly cause it to happen?

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Now, having completed this exercise, you may have a clearer idea that, for *any* accident/mishap, it is possible that many factors could be responsible, in addition to your own contribution. Assigning responsibility for something going wrong is not easy. People with OCD make the assignment of blame so overly simple that it defies both logic and the facts. In the absence of perfect certainty, people with OCD just automatically assume, "It's all my fault! I'm going to be punished for it!"

## Thought Challenging—Facing “The Accuser”

The experience of many with OCD has been described as feeling like being in a court of law, having been charged with a crime (having carried out some act of negligence, or irresponsibility on your part, that may result in catastrophic harm to others), and being vigorously prosecuted by the “OCD attorney.” Unlike our present criminal court system, where a person is “innocent until proven guilty,” in the courtroom of OCD-related thoughts and ideas, you feel “guilty until proven innocent.” You must do that which is logically impossible—you must prove you did *not* do something bad, negligent, or harmful. You have been placed on the witness stand and are facing wild accusations from this overbearing, cunning accuser. This accuser will cite even the most circumstantial, remotely related evidence to cast doubt that you are not guilty! Each piece of “evidence” brings waves of anxiety and fear. And the more you try to defend yourself or argue with the prosecution, the guiltier you look to the jury and feel within yourself.

In the spaces below, you are going to challenge this accuser by doing a Thought Challenging Exercise. First write down your worst fear (such as of causing an accident or harm to innocents as a result of having done something negligent). Next, write down all of the accuser’s “evidence” to “prove” the statement is true (it could be some remotely related fact, something irrelevant, or “it just feels that way”). Also, rate the degree to which you *truly* believe that the evidence proves that your worst fear actually happened. Then, you are to logically challenge whether the evidence you cite *really* proves your obsessive fear. The goal is not to completely rid yourself of the guilt and discomfort of the obsessive fear but to reduce it significantly, tolerate it better, and “take the air out” of the accuser’s (OCD’s) claims of your guilt/responsibility for catastrophes.

### Thought Challenging Exercise

Fearful thought: (for example, *I’ve caused a highway accident by throwing a banana peel out the window*)

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Using a scale of 0–100, how would you rate the probability (%) of your fear actually occurring? (Probably pretty high at this point) \_\_\_\_\_%

What is the evidence to support the feared event took place? (“The accuser” is pointing the finger at you! Write down as many as you can think of—3 to 5 is most typical.)

- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____  |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____  |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____  |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____  |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |



## Challenging the Evidence—Fighting Back Against “the Accuser”

1. Is the fact that (write evidence #1) \_\_\_\_\_  
really evidence of danger? Explain why *not*. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Is the fact that (write evidence #2) \_\_\_\_\_  
really evidence of danger? Explain why *not*. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is the fact that (write evidence #3) \_\_\_\_\_  
really evidence of danger? Explain why *not*. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is the fact that (write evidence #4) \_\_\_\_\_  
really evidence of danger? Explain why *not*. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Is the fact that (write evidence #5) \_\_\_\_\_  
really evidence of danger? Explain why *not*. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Continue in a similar manner for all “evidence.”

Now, when you’ve argued against each bit of “evidence,” answer the following question: Using a scale of 0–100, how would you *now* rate the probability (%) of your fear actually occurring? (Probably somewhat lower at this point) \_\_\_\_\_%

At this point, you probably are better able to “argue back” against the accuser and find some relief from these negative thoughts. One cautionary note: beware of playing into the accuser’s game by repeatedly arguing back against the OCD in a compulsive or repetitive manner. This means that you have been “hooked” again by the OCD into compulsions, and you should stop immediately. You can make significant progress by merely acknowledging the falseness of the accuser and “letting it just be there” without even doing anything. Eventually, the accuser gets bored and the obsessive thoughts burn out on their own as a result of your decision to not respond to them.

If you should find after challenging your fears that your belief in the probability (%) of your fear actually occurring has *not* decreased or has decreased only a little, you may be stuck with *overvalued ideas*, which we discussed in chapter 4. Medication may be required to help you get your beliefs “unstuck,” so you can make progress. See the section “What If My Beliefs Aren’t Changing?” at the end of this chapter.

## Challenging “What if?” Thinking

Obsessional worries most often involve a catastrophic view of the future and persistent feelings of doubt. These thoughts always start with “What if?” For example, “What if I get AIDS?” or “What if I didn’t turn off the stove?” or “What if I ran someone over?”

A helpful way to deal with “what-iffing” is to go one step beyond “What if?” and ask yourself, “So What!?” Then go to the next step and ask yourself what you’d reasonably do if the

situation you fear actually occurred. The third step is to ask yourself, "What might be a positive result should the feared situation actually happen?" Finally, ask yourself what you might be able to do now to be prepared should the feared situation actually occur. Here is how this exercise might be done in Michael's case:

*What if* a piece of paper flies out the window and causes an accident? *So What?*

*Then I will* accept the consequences, possibly pay a fine or go to jail. *So What?*

*Then I will* still have my life and three meals a day. My family will visit me there. I can catch up on my reading and write a book while in jail.

*What is the worst that can happen?* I could run out of reading material.

*What is a possible positive result of the "What if?" fear?* I could become more knowledgeable due to the knowledge I'd acquire while in jail, improve my letter writing skills, and learn the virtue of patience.

*How can I prepare now for the possibility?* Construct an exhaustive reading list, purchase writing implements.

If this sounds like an exercise in absurdity, it certainly is! But then, so many of the obsessive fears of OCD are exercises in absurdity! Now, do the exercise with your own obsessive fears and worries:

*What if* \_\_\_\_\_ *So What!?*

*Then I will* \_\_\_\_\_ *So What!?*

*Then I will* \_\_\_\_\_

*What is the worst that can happen?* \_\_\_\_\_

*What is a possible positive result of the "What if?" fear?* \_\_\_\_\_

*How can I prepare now for the possibility?* \_\_\_\_\_

### **"What if" I Lose Control?**

The "What if I lose control" theme of "What if?" thinking involves the obsessive preoccupation with the idea of "snapping," or losing control and suddenly acting in a manner that's alien to how you know yourself to be (this will be discussed further in chapter 10). People with this obsession often believe that normal emotions, such as fear, doubt, and anger, are dangerous and