

## 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?* \_\_\_\_\_

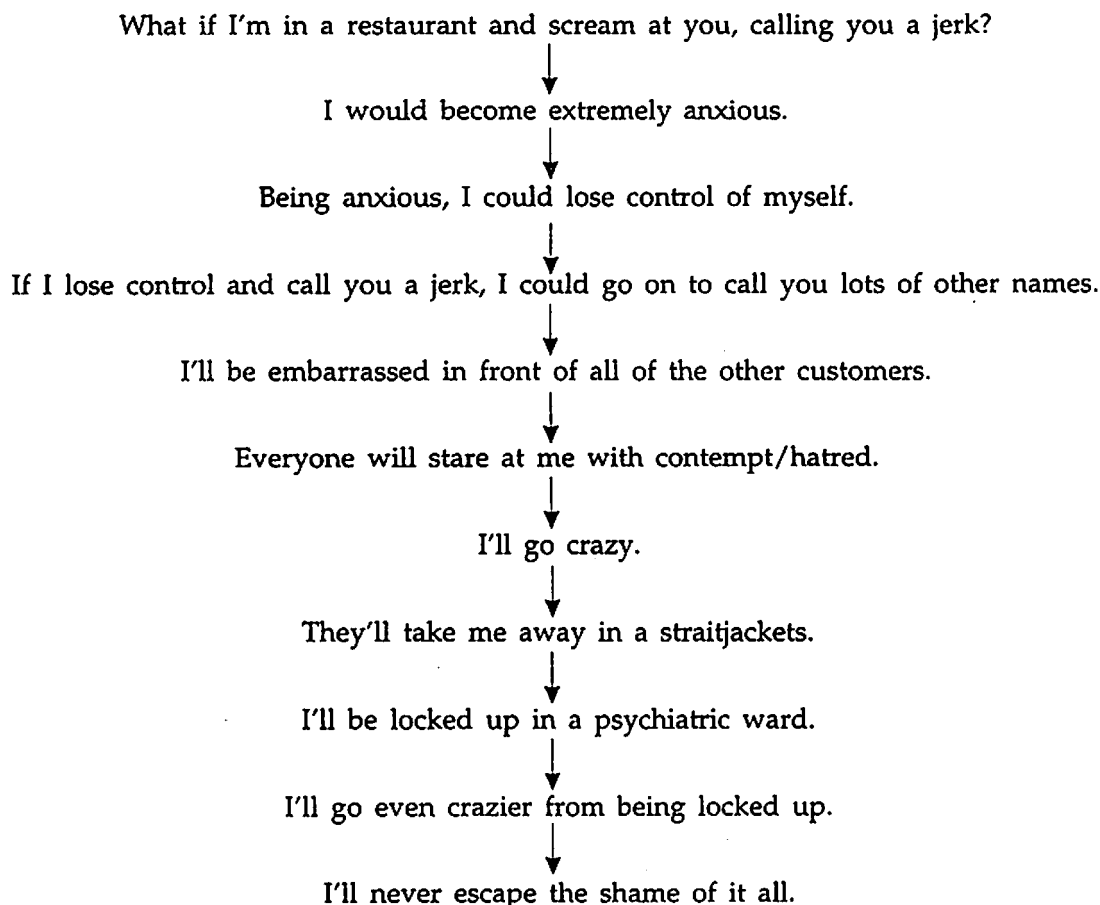
*What is a possible positive result of the "What if?" fear?* \_\_\_\_\_

*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

should be avoided at all costs. Robert, a salesman with OCD, avoided all social situations for fear of getting angry and losing control in public places. His typical fear sequence goes as follows:



"What if?" thinking combined with the notion that anger is dangerous results in extreme avoidance and isolation from any public or social situation where anger or anxiety could possibly be triggered.

One helpful strategy is to construct an imaginal exposure using a scenario like the one above. Chapter 7 describes the steps in carrying out an imaginal exposure. By repeatedly confronting the feared situation in your imagination, the imagery of danger becomes less and less potent.

Another strategy is to devise an "experiment" in getting angry or "losing control." Try the following practice situations as "mini-experiments":

1. Using a cassette tape recorder, record a five-minute role play of a situation that typically or potentially arouses your anger. It can be an ongoing situation from your life, or one that typically irks you, such as a salesman you perceive to be purposely trying to cheat you. Allow yourself to argue vigorously with your role-play partner/salesman. Allow the dialog to become more and more heated. Allow your language to become stronger as your temper rises. You may even start yelling. Punch a pillow ... really let go!
2. Now, rewind the tape and listen to the role play. If you think you can make it even more dramatic, rerecord it. Listen again to the finished product. Observe your anxiety level as