WILSON: OCD is not about being particular or tidy — it's debilitating

By Erica Wilson
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I'll be honest – I am perhaps one of the messiest people I know. My car always looks like a landfill, and I spend my weekends cleaning up mounds of stuff that has accumulated on my apartment floors and counters. Given that, it might surprise people to know that I struggle on a daily basis with obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD.

Instead of needing things to be organized a certain way or constantly cleaning as OCD is often portrayed in pop culture, I've struggled to drive, write, cook for myself or work food service jobs. OCD turns the mundane into the mountainous as it constantly seeks certainty but never seems to quite find it, leading to a loop of "what ifs" that can easily become debilitating. It makes you question your perception of the world around you, seek reassurance and wonder if you remember things correctly.

Especially with this week being OCD Awareness Week, I believe it is important to help promote understanding of the disorder. OCD is largely misunderstood, oftentimes referenced in regard to a simple preference or serving as the punchline of a joke.

OCD is defined by obsessions, which include a cycle of persistent and intrusive thoughts that cause significant distress and anxiety, as well as compulsions, which are performed in an attempt to relieve that anxiety. While most people experience intrusive thoughts to some extent, in order for someone to be diagnosed with OCD, these thoughts and resulting actions must be difficult to control and significantly interfere with one's daily life.

Each person with OCD struggles with a unique combination of obsessions and compulsions, meaning the disorder never looks exactly the same for any two people. Just a few subtype examples include checking, contamination, harm, just right, false memory and relationship.

Recently, driving is the area in my life that has been most impacted by OCD. I've found myself consumed over the last few years with thoughts of "what if I make a mistake and cause an accident?" every time I even think of driving on the highway. It's caused me such panic that I've resorted to avoiding the highway altogether, something that is terribly inconvenient for someone that lives far away from their family and many friends. Avoidance is a common OCD compulsion, one that is invisible but incredibly impairing.

I've missed out on important family gatherings and countless friend's milestones, all because the thought of even attempting the drive would send me into a spiral. It hasn't always allowed me to show up for my friends and family in the way I want to, which has been super disheartening over time.

And even when I try to make various trips on side roads, OCD finds me there too. Lately, I've struggled with the persistent feeling that I'm driving the wrong way down the road, even though deep down, I know that I'm not. It's led to hours of sitting in random parking lots far from home, feeling like I'd never make it back and like I never wanted to try another trip again.

The more you give in to OCD, the more it seems to take away. It likes to make your world become smaller and smaller. It's greedy in that way.

Repetitive checking is another OCD compulsion that others may not always notice, but is incredibly time consuming. I used to drive in circles to make sure I hadn't hit anything on the road just to prevent hours of replaying my actions in my mind and wondering if I had. Of course, just checking once never seemed to be enough.

With my writing, I have also struggled with intense checking behaviors that become incredibly time consuming, as I read over what I've written for hours and play parts of transcripts over and over again until it "feels just right." Although, my finished product is almost always the same as before I go down the checking rabbit hole.

Though I didn't realize it then, one of the first times I began to experience intense anxiety from OCD was while working in food service throughout college. I constantly worried that I had accidentally contaminated someone's food, often feeling powerless because once the food went out, all I could do was replay my actions in my mind. A wave of almost unbearable anxiety would wash over me every time the phone rang, because someone could be calling to say I had made them sick.

The worries always followed me home after my shift, too. Whenever I was in charge of closing, I was always very cautious to turn off all the appliances, but I would be kept awake at night by thoughts of "But, what if you didn't? What if the place is on fire right now and it's your fault?"

The next morning, oftentimes I would "just so happen" to drive by. You know, just to make sure the smoothie shop wasn't burning to the ground.

Similar worries infiltrated their way into my apartment kitchen this year after a tiny flame appeared for a millisecond on my stovetop. It was harmless, but for me, it opened up a world of "what ifs." I stopped using the stove altogether, and once I had avoided it for long enough, I began to wonder, "But what if the oven is dangerous too?" I resorted to using the microwave to cook, just skipping dinner when I had abandoned the courage to make my oven-ready meals, or racking up takeout bills for months.

There are several more examples of how OCD has affected my life that I could try to squeeze into this column, some of them even more surprising. But all in all, I am hoping to have given people a better understanding of what OCD is and can look like — and perhaps show at least one person out there that they are not as alone as they feel.

OCD latches onto the things that are most important to us, so when my OCD thrives on doubt and uncertainty, I try to just take it as a sign of my dedication, compassion and care. And in

relation to my career, in some ways, my intense attention to detail and need to make sure everything is exactly right has made me a better journalist.

Funny how something that is easily one of my greatest weaknesses can also be one of my greatest strengths.