

Why Do We Have Compulsions?

When we were children we needed our parents to love us because our survival depended upon it. We tried very hard to find ways of ensuring this. People with compulsions (most of us to some extent) concluded that if we did a certain thing then we could be sure of being loved. If we were tidy, if we looked after our siblings, if we put other people first, if we kept clean. If, if, if, then maybe we wouldn't be abandoned, we thought.

Of course, for most of us parental love wasn't conditional. They would have loved us no matter what we did, but we didn't know that. We were working with childish brains, pre-logical and prone to magical thinking. A chance remark or two, an random association of behaviour and apparent consequence, are all that are needed at a critical stage in early childhood to create a pattern of thinking and behaviour which may persist throughout life.

Consequently, when as adults we are visited by a compulsion to do something, it is as if our very lives depend upon it because we spontaneously regress to a time in our lives when they seemed to.

A second group of compulsive behaviours arise out of the same sense of fear and despair. In these cases no pre-emptive behaviour was successful. The sense of abandonment was triggered so the person adopts a compulsive behaviour to distract and numb away the pain. They may abuse substances, engage in exciting and dangerous activities, gamble, or shop and eat to excess.

The source of both types of compulsion is the same – a childhood fear of an abandonment which probably never happened. If it had happened we would probably not be so anxious about it because we would now know that we survived it. By continuing to act out the compulsion we believe we are staving off some disaster.

In fact, compulsions are best treated by facing the fear. If we refuse the invitation to do the compulsive activity, let the resultant anxiety build and recede, we can banish compulsions fairly quickly. Surrendering to a compulsion ensures it's return. Trying to hold out against a compulsion but giving in after a while makes it more likely you will have the compulsion more strongly next time. You have to be determined and consistent.

Remember that the anxiety you feel now belongs to the past when you were defenceless and dependent. Now you are an adult capable of caring for yourself. You have grown up into someone who can be resourceful and strong, only your emotional life is lagging behind a little.

Is it time yet to free yourself from your past?

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.