

Script – Print – When the mind won't rest: Living with OCD

Last NFL postseason, Washington kicker Zane Gonzalez made the biggest kick of his career when he made a game-ending field goal against Tampa Bay, giving the Commanders their first playoff win in 20 years.

But Gonzalez made more headlines with his extensive pre-kick routine than the actual game-winner itself. TV cameras caught Gonzalez's extensive routine, which included fixing his sock, tapping his helmet and adjusting his hair repeatedly before the kick. It wasn't any superstition, but part of Gonzalez's obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Fans took to social media to scrutinize Gonzalez's unusual behavior as some type of nervous behavior. It wasn't until after the game that the kicker opened up in interviews about the struggles of dealing with OCD.

According to the International OCD Foundation, OCD is a mental health disorder that affects people of all ages and happens when a person gets stuck in a cycle of obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are thoughts, images or urges that may be extreme or disturbing, which repeat in our minds and are accompanied by the feeling that things have to be "just right."

Compulsions are excessive or repetitive behaviors that a person uses to satisfy the obsessions in our mind. Examples include frequent washing or cleaning, or excessive checking to make sure a door is locked or a light is turned off.

According to the OCD Foundation, about 1 in 40 people have OCD. But not all OCD is diagnosed, and some people suffer from anxiety, which can mimic OCD behaviors.

Jennifer Brandt is a psychotherapist for OSF HealthCare. She not only treats clients with OCD, but lives with the disorder herself.

"Risk factors for OCD could be childhood trauma, a history of excessive anxiety and worry," says Brandt. "These obsessive thoughts come with worry, and we just can't get it out of our head unless we do something to satisfy that thought." Brandt adds that OCD can be genetic or linked to a single event such as a serious health issue.

The most effective treatments for OCD are medications and cognitive behavioral therapy or a combination of both. Brandt says medications can help calm down both the brain and body. Therapy, such as exposure response therapy, can help with techniques that can be used to defuse situations as they develop.

"Exposure therapy is where you're exposing yourself to the things that stress you out, but you're increasing that distress tolerance or window of tolerance you may have," she explains. "So, the thoughts and worries that we have don't seem so overwhelming. We can sit in the stress and know that we're going to be OK."

Developing coping skills

Brandt says when a person is experiencing certain thoughts it's important to develop coping skills such as redirecting our actions.

"So instead of doing that compulsion, or instead of satisfying that thought, let's sit in the stress a little bit, and let's do something that makes us happy, whether it is like coloring, talking to a friend, going for a walk or cooking. Tap into the hobbies that make us happy," she says. "That way we can reflect on it and think, 'OK, I had the thought, but it didn't stop me from living my life.'"

Brandt first exhibited OCD tendencies when she was in fourth grade. She remembers having thoughts of friends and family being harmed after watching certain TV programs. Her parents took her to a therapist who prescribed medication, which helped alleviate her fears. But years later, her OCD returned.

"When I was in graduate school, I went through a very traumatic event, and suffered a lot of PTSD from that event," she says. "My therapist came to the conclusion that the severe trauma may have triggered the OCD to present more moderate symptoms rather than mild."

Brandt encourages family and friends to be supportive when it comes to loved ones who battle OCD. "I think a lot of reassurance is huge with OCD," she says. "Especially if your loved one is going through the exposure side of therapy or trying to extend their stress. Reassurance that everything's going to be OK, reassurance that they're doing the right things for themselves."

Support groups can also be helpful. And one more tip from Brandt. People with OCD need to set up boundaries when using social media. Too much exposure to outside influences can cause added stress and anxiety. And those are triggers people OCD simply don't need.

For more information about behavioral and mental health services, visit the OSF HealthCare [website](#).