

Accepting life's uncertainties, OCD conference will be in Minneapolis

Inver Grove Heights man speaks out to help others

By Jeremy Olson

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Randy Herrera looked with revulsion at the used, moist gum in the palm of his hand. It had been chewed, but by whom?

It was the ultimate test for someone with obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is often defined by an insatiable desire for neatness, cleanliness and order. Herrera was being told to open his mouth and chew.

Psychologist Jonathon Grayson could see Herrera wavering. "Randy," he said, "do you want OCD for another 20 years? Do you want your family to deal with your OCD for another 20 years?"

Looking back, it was a breakpoint for Herrera, which occurred during last year's national conference of the Obsessive Compulsive Foundation in Boston. Herrera chewed the gum — part of Grayson's group exposure session — and felt exhilaration. For the first time in 20 years, he really believed he could gain control of his compulsive desires and actions.

A year later, Herrera has gone from learner to teacher.

The Inver Grove Heights man will be speaking about his turnaround at this year's national conference, set for Aug. 7-9 in Minneapolis.

"It was amazing how in just a few days I was able to turn that corner," Herrera said. "It's virtually gone. It's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling and place where I am now."

Herrera hopes his story will inspire others with OCD and encourage them to take part in the therapeutic events at the conference. He also is launching OCD Twin Cities, a local chapter of the foundation, in order to create more support services for people in the Twin Cities with the disorder.

"A lot of people with OCD are very smart," he said. "Their intelligence will lead them to know that they want help. They just don't know where to go."

OCD has become much more familiar to Americans through movies such as "As Good As It Gets," television series such as "Monk" and the new "Obsessed" documentary on AE. "Being OCD" has even become a catch phrase for quirky habits, but the disorder itself requires a level of repetition or obsession so severe that it damages a person's relationships, education or work.

Herrera said the disorder was a hardship in his work in the hotel industry, and often made him detached from the people around him — including his wife and two daughters.

Antidepressant drugs eliminated a third of his symptoms, but Herrera said the lessons he gained during last year's gum-chewing session and other conference events were critical.

Gone now is his compulsion to do everything in multiples of three — such as opening a door three times or making the sign of the cross three or six or nine times. Gone is the fear that God would hurt his family if he didn't follow certain religious observances.

It is a significant self-improvement for someone whose first OCD symptoms emerged in the 1980s. Many people like Herrera wait years before seeking help, which is unfortunate because OCD is remarkably treatable, said OCD specialist Rene Reinardy, who is working with Herrera to form the local chapter.

Some patients find medication helpful while others do not. Some need months of therapy sessions while others need a few to acknowledge their disorders and map out coping strategies.

Exposure therapy is key for people with OCD, the psychologist said. "When they ... start standing up to their fears and they realize, 'oh that habit did fizzle out,' then they really get motivated to keep going."

Grayson's gum-chewing session was an example of "flooding" exposure, which immediately forces people to confront their fears. Reinardy usually offers gradual exposure, which gives her patients time to adjust and to achieve smaller goals. Perhaps she would just show the gum to patients first and then have them hold it and chew it at other times.

Reinardy commended Herrera for speaking at this year's conference.

"People want to know that it's possible" to get better, she said. "Because OCD is so overwhelming, they want to see a face."

Grayson, who practices in Philadelphia, was elated to learn that one of this year's speakers benefitted so much from his session, which he will repeat in Minneapolis. In addition to chewing used gum, Grayson said, he will take people downtown to put their hands in or near dumpsters — showing them that they won't automatically suffer diseases.

Many with OCD fear that their thoughts or words can come true, so Grayson said he might have them look up and curse at a plane to prove to them that it won't crash. A major component of OCD is the

unending need to feel certain and safe, he said, so these exercises help people accept life's uncertainties.

Even as Herrera has prepared this summer to tell his success story, he has worked to confront a lingering compulsion. Every time he hit a bump with his car, he felt a need to turn around out of the slight chance that he ran over someone.

Herrera made it a goal — which he said he just now accomplished — to overcome that fear before the August presentation. Knowing how long it took him to get help, Herrera said he wants to be as inspiring an example to others as possible.

"I don't want somebody to have to wait 20 years or 17 years," he said, "to get better."

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OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER

"Being OCD" has become a catch phrase to describe quirky habits, but the actual disorder refers to repetitive behaviors that disrupt relationships, education or work. OCD often emerges in childhood and persists for years before people recognize the need or gain the courage to seek help.

By the numbers:

One in 50 Americans may have OCD.

Nine years is a typical delay between symptoms and diagnosis.

17 years is a typical delay between symptoms and effective treatment.

Common obsessions:

Fearing the spread of germs by touching doorknobs or being in public.

Needing belongings in exact order and place.

Paralyzing fear that your thoughts or actions will hurt someone.

Excessive doubting of religious or moral beliefs.

Common compulsions:

Frequent hand washing.

Repeating simple tasks, such as turning lights on and off.

Checking locks, doors, etc., out of fear.

Counting household items and needing them in pairs or multiples.

OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE FOUNDATION CONFERENCE

August 7-9, Hyatt Regency, Minneapolis

Register at 617-973-5801 or ocfoundation.org