

# Five Keys to Beating Scrupulosity

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## What is Scrupulosity?

**Definition:** Obsessions and compulsions containing religious themes, hypermorality, pathological doubt/worry about sin, and excessive religious behavior.

- Symptoms follow along the lines of moral/religious teaching of a particular religious group (e.g., don't lie, don't be impure, don't harm, have good motives).
- Blasphemy/sacrilege
- Sex/immorality
- Violence/harm
- Clean/unclean – Pure/impure

ABRAMOWITZ, HUPPERT, COHEN, TOLIN, & CAHILL, 2002; GREENBERG & WITZTUM, 2001

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### Type 1: Intrusive, ego-dystonic, shocking (i.e., repugnant obsessions)

- The presence of these obsessions shock and alarm the sufferer.
  - “Oh no, I think I just shouted blasphemous thoughts at God!”
- The person has a sense of disgust about the content of the obsession.
  - “What kind of person am I if I had a thought like this?”
- Sufferers feel very shameful about having the thoughts and often feel they need to hide the thoughts from others.

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### Type 2: Faith-syntonic, ruminative obsessions

- The person doesn't question the presence of the obsession itself; rather, accepts it as face-valid.
  - “Am I truly at peace with God?”
  - “What if I am proud?”
  - “Did I just lie?”
- The obsessional thoughts and pathological doubt is interpreted as syntonic with the person's worldview.
  - The distress occurs due to the implications of the potential consequences of the obsession.
- Obsessional rumination and analysis tend to be the primary mental neutralizations.

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## Does Religion Cause OCD and/or Scrupulosity?

Scrupulosity has been identified among followers of all the major world religions.

- The OCD tends to take on the characteristics of the person's religious and cultural beliefs.

*“There is no evidence that religion causes OCD. However, your religious background and experience can influence the type of obsessional concerns that develop in people with OCD.”*

PURDON & CLARK (2005). OVERCOMING OBSESSIVE THOUGHTS, P. 94

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## 5 Keys to Beating Scrupulosity

1. Faith, Doubt, and Uncertainty
2. ACT Skills – Forward in Faith!
3. Effective Support & the 85% Rule
4. Helpful Exposures
5. Self-Compassion

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## Faith, Doubt, and Uncertainty - 1

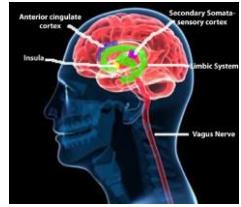
- Faith is not the absence of feeling uncertain. Faith is going forward through the uncertainty.
- OCD wants me to believe that uncertainty and doubt are dangerous. While uncertainty is uncomfortable, it is not dangerous, and I can tolerate it.
- My faith is what I believe, not what I feel.
  - Feelings are not facts.
- I can have faith and still feel uncertain. Mark 9:24, "...I believe; help my unbelief!"
- God loves me completely, even when my feelings are uncertain and clouded by doubt.
- God understands that I don't understand.

[www.accounseling.org/coping-statements-for-christians-with-ocd-scrupulosity](http://www.accounseling.org/coping-statements-for-christians-with-ocd-scrupulosity)

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## Faith, Doubt, and Uncertainty - 2

- OCD blocks the peaceful feelings that people of faith desire in religious practice.
- Vagus nerve projections from the brain (limbic system; esp. cingulate) extend into the chest and abdomen and transmit the feeling that "something is wrong."
- This feeling is the neurological opposite of physically *feeling* peaceful.



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## ACT: Forward in Faith - 1

### Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) Acceptance Skills

- Can help you detach from assigning meaning to obsessions which leads to fighting and analyzing and leaving the present moment.
- When thoughts of a religious, sexual, or immoral nature come into your mind, you must reject the notion that you must fight, analyze, or control the obsessions in order to show God (or yourself) that you don't want them.
- If you wonder if you have sinned (e.g., "What if I...?") or aren't sure if you have, then you need to move on and go forward as if you didn't. Keep moving forward.

[www.accounseling.org/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-act-resources/](http://www.accounseling.org/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-act-resources/)

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## ACT: Forward in Faith - 2

### Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) Committed Action Skills

- Can help you focus on living a meaningful life instead of getting stuck in your head.
- ACT is excellent for people of faith because it helps them focus on living their values.... Which their faith informs.... This creates a beautiful synergy.
- Get out of your head and into your life.
- The key is the direction of your movement not the feelings you have.

[www.accounseling.org/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-act-resources/](http://www.accounseling.org/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-act-resources/)

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## Effective Support & the 85% Rule - 1

- Reassurance seeking, repetitive confession, asking questions for reassurance, etc. will only keep you stuck.
- Support people should understand OCD (or be willing to learn about it). They need to know about OCD well enough to identify reassurance seeking.
- It takes time and effort to get family, clergy, mental health professionals, and physicians on the same page, but it is worth it!
- Identify someone (pastor, etc.) who can help you and your therapist determine what things are part of the true practice of your faith and church community (i.e., what is normative) versus what is OCD.

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## Effective Support & the 85% Rule - 2

- You need to be able to do whatever other people from your faith community can do as part of normal practice of faith.
- The 85% rule can also be used to help you identify what is normative (i.e., typical behavior or practice). If out of 100 people from your church, 85% or more do something, then it is normative.

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## Exposures: What You Do (and Don't) Have to Do - 1

1. You do not have to do exposures that involve doing things your faith specifically forbids or says is sinful or immoral.
2. You do not have to destroy, tear, or burn your Bible.
3. You do not need to do exposures to pornography.
4. You do not have to sit in church shouting things in your head you consider blasphemous at the preacher. But, you do need to be able to sit in church and allow the thoughts you fear are blasphemous to pass through without neutralizing.

[www.accounseling.org/principles-of-effective-and-religiously-sensitive-exposures](http://www.accounseling.org/principles-of-effective-and-religiously-sensitive-exposures)

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## Exposures: What You Do (and Don't) Have to Do - 2

5. You do not have to give up the core beliefs of your faith. But, you do need to learn how to follow the tenants of your faith and not OCD's skewed version of faith.
6. You do not have to leave or stop going to your church. But, you do need to learn to live in a way that is functional.
7. You do not have to completely stop praying. But, you do need to learn to pray in a way that doesn't feed into OCD. (e.g., "God, give me grace to push through my feelings of uncertainty and to not do my rituals").
8. You do not have to share or agree to the same religious beliefs as your therapist. But, you do need to follow through on your agreed-upon exposure exercises.

[www.accounseling.org/principles-of-effective-and-religiously-sensitive-exposures](http://www.accounseling.org/principles-of-effective-and-religiously-sensitive-exposures)

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## Self-Compassion - 1

- OCD is an affliction.
- How does God feel about and treat the afflicted?
  - *Isaiah 42:3, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench..."*
- Examples of ways to increase self-compassion:
  - *How would you treat a good friend or loved one dealing with the same issues you are?*
  - *"I am only asking that you treat yourself like God would treat an afflicted person and how you would treat a struggling loved one."*

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## Self-Compassion - 2

- Keep a growth mindset vs a pass-fail mindset (perfectionism).
- "Oh, no! I'm not going this right. I'm failing!"
- "That's a good reminder. I need to work on that."
- Don't pathologize what is normal.
- If you feel you are supposed to feel positive and happy 100% of the time, then you are going to feel like a failure.
- Almost everyone would say that their motivation and desire goes up and down over time.

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## Online Resources on Scrupulosity

- **Ted's - Scrupulosity Info:** [www.scrupulosity.org](http://www.scrupulosity.org)
  - Coping Statements for Christians with OCD and Scrupulosity
  - Principles of Effective and Religiously-Sensitive Exposures
  - Religious and Moral Scrupulosity in Christians
- **Ian Osborn, MD**
  - <http://ocdandchristianity.com>
- **Peace of Mind Foundation – Videos**
  - <http://www.peaceofmind.com/education/types-of-ocd/immoral-or-scrupulous-thoughts/>
- **Two-Screen Method of Mindfulness**
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3FEMbMXv6Q>

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## Helpful Books for Treatment

- Harris, R. (2014). The Illustrated Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living. Shambhala
- Knabb, J. (2016). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Christian Clients: A Faith-Based Workbook. Routledge.
- Osborn, I. (2008). Can Christianity Cure OCD?: A Psychiatrist Explores the Role of Faith in Treatment. Brazos
- Purdon, C., & Clark, D. (2005). Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts. New Harbinger.
- Symington, S. (2019). Freedom from Anxious Thoughts and Feelings. New Harbinger.

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