

7 Shifts for Beating Religious Scrupulosity

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Ted Witzig, Jr. Ph.D. – www.scrupulosity.org
Apostolic Christian Counseling & Family Services
877-370-9988 www.accounseling.org

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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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Main Treatments for OCD/Scrupulosity

- Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT)
- Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Medications
 - Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI)

- Over time I am doing more ACT & ERP in combination in my clinical work.
- The majority of my scrupulous clients also take a medication at some point in their treatment.

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Spiritual Support for OCD/Scrupulosity

1. Viewing OCD treatment as an act of faith.
2. Living into your faith as it is typically practiced in your faith community.
3. Practicing scripture reading, prayer, etc. in a healthy manner that is not bound by OCD-rules.
4. Developing a healthy God image
5. Knowledgeable support people.
6. Avoiding reassurance seeking/repetitive confessions

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7 Shifts for Beating Scrupulosity

FROM

1. Faith is what I feel
2. Taking medication may mask a spiritual problem
3. Perfectionism and All-or-Nothing Thinking
4. OCD is helping me to be spiritually safe
5. I must continually analyze the past
6. Picturing God through the distorted lens of OCD
7. I must prove to God (and myself) I don't want these thoughts

TO

1. Walking Faith: living into my beliefs
2. Medication may be one way God helps me overcome OCD
3. Growth is about progress not perfection
4. God desires that I break OCD rules in order to be free.
5. Healing is in moving forward
6. Viewing God without OCD's distortion
7. God understands OCD and its treatment

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From: 'Faith is What I Feel'

To: 'Walking Faith: living into my beliefs'

SHIFT 1 OF 7

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Feelings vs Walking Faith

- OCD wants you to use your emotions as the measure of your relationship with God.
- Checking your sensations to see if you feel peaceful is a common trap that OCD wants you to do!
 - Fighting with emotions is nearly guaranteed to increase unpleasant emotions and to diminish pleasant ones.
- **Key:** *Faith is not the absence of feeling uncertain. Faith is trusting God through the uncertainty.*
- 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!"

www.accounseling.org/coping-statements-for-christians-with-ocd-scrupulosity

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From: 'Taking medication may mask a spiritual problem'

To: 'Medication may be one way God helps me overcome OCD'

SHIFT 2 OF 7

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Medication: Spiritual Pro or Con?

- You are a physical, psychological, relational, and spiritual being.
 - Consider what happens if you put an "or" instead of an "and" between those parts!
- Most people wouldn't dream of saying to a diabetic that taking insulin is a lack of faith or that it masks a faith issue.
- Rather, we would thank God for the blessing of medication and knowledge that helps address physical and emotional challenges.
- We thank God for the means by which He brings help and healing.
- When your brain is healthy, it can process thoughts and emotions better.

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Medication: Spiritual Pro or Con?

- I don't fight with clients about taking medication or not.
- For me, it is very simple:
 1. At the beginning of treatment, we do several assessments so we have your baseline level of functioning.
 2. If you don't want to take medication initially in treatment, that is fine. If you do the CBT/ACT/ERP and reduce your symptoms and live into your values in a way that meets your goals, then we won't need to revisit this.
 3. If you don't want to take medication initially, but you are not able or willing to do the CBT/ACT/ERP and you aren't overcoming and living into your values, then we will revisit this. Medication is one tool in the toolbox.

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From: 'Perfectionism and All-or-Nothing Thinking'

To: 'Growth is about progress not perfection'

SHIFT 3 OF 7

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Perfectionism vs. Growth Mindset

- OCD wants you to view your spiritual walk as all-or-nothing.
- This has the effect of leading to avoidance/procrastination.
- Fears of catastrophic consequences are common.
- Example of how OCD would like to distort prayer
 - How long is a "good" prayer?
 - How do you know if you said all of the correct words?
 - How many things should you pray for on your prayer list? Can you take someone or something off your prayer list?
 - Did you forget the wording or mix up the wording of the prayer?
 - Were you sincere as you prayed? Did you have the right feelings as you prayed?
 - Did you get distracted or tired while you prayed?

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Perfectionism vs. Growth Mindset

- Growth is about progress, not perfection.
- Lean into the direction of your values and focus on taking steps in the desired direction.
- God desires a relationship with you; He is not a cosmic accountant simply tallying up all your mistakes!
- Think of a parent with a child and how the parent encourages, nurtures, and corrects the child over time.
- As you go through treatment, sometimes you will "win" against OCD, sometimes you will "lose."
- Your goal is to refocus on your values and get moving in that direction!

GROWTH IN THE RECOVERY PROCESS: [HTTPS://VIMEO.COM/222953315](https://vimeo.com/222953315)

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From: 'OCD is helping me to be spiritually safe.'

To: 'God desires that I break OCD rules in order to be free.'

SHIFT 4 OF 7

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Compulsions: Safety or Prison?

- Often, OCD convinces people that by doing compulsions (behaviorally, mentally, or avoidance) that they are being spiritual cautious... which is interpreted as safer and, therefore, more spiritual.
- In fact, obsessional doubt often holds people captive in OCD treatment with thoughts like:
 - "What if this isn't OCD, but is actually spiritual?"
 - "If I knew for sure this was OCD, and not spiritual, then I wouldn't worry?"
- Unfortunately, this type of thinking plays right into OCD's hands and leaves us feeling like we must analyze while the weight of eternal life or death is hanging in the balance!

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Compulsions: Safety or Prison?

- While it feels the key to dealing with uncertainty/doubt is to seek and find certainty, seeking certainty accidentally puts "more fuel in OCD's engine."
- *The goal is to live by faith and break OCD's rules instead of seeking certainty.*
- Walking by faith may not give you the emotional feeling of certainty that you want in the moment, but it will give you a full life consistent with your beliefs and values.

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From: 'I must continually analyze the past'

To: 'Freedom is found in moving forward'

SHIFT 5 OF 7

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Forward or Backward?

- Oh, no! Did I lie? Do I need to explain more to my minister than I shared in my last confession? Did I blaspheme in my prayer?
- One of the most common things that people with scrupulosity do is to replay the scenes from the past to make sure they didn't do something wrong.
- Unfortunately, analyzing the past will not help you regain your present and have a future!
- Yes, it is true, that there are times to go back to someone and say you are sorry.
 - You can use the 85% rule to help you know when to do this!
- However, the majority of the time we need to go forward, not backward!
- If you try riding a bike by looking behind you over your shoulder, you will eventually crash and run into something!!

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From: 'Picturing God through the distorted lens of OCD'

To: 'Viewing God without OCD's distortion'

SHIFT 6 OF 7

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How Clear Are Your Lenses?

- OCD wants to "color the lenses" through which you view the world. This includes all aspects of your life, including the spiritual and religious.
- Consider colored lenses on glasses.
- Consider then, how OCD coloration of the following:
 - Scripture, Prayer
 - How God views you
 - How you view God
 - Worship Services
 - Service, charity, giving.

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How Clear Are Your Lenses?

- Having an external perspective is helpful.
- Often, my scrupulous clients work with their spiritual advisor on this.
 - This means that the spiritual advisor should understand OCD and its treatment! I often invite them to attend a session.
- I ask questions to learn about how the client feels God views them and their symptoms.
 - Listen for indicators a range of descriptors along the range of compassion to condemnation.
- I often find it helpful to use a picture of Jesus with a lamb or the 23rd Psalm to provide imagery of a compassionate perspective.

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From: 'I must prove to God (and myself) I don't want these thoughts'

To: 'God understands OCD and its treatment'

SHIFT 7 OF 7

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Does God Understand my OCD Battle?

- Intrusive thoughts with moral content (sexual, violent, religious) are often distressing to people because the thoughts feel like a violation of the person's character or moral code.
- Often, people with scrupulosity feel like they must fight against and try to control the thoughts in order to prove to God and themselves that they do not want the thoughts.
- Unfortunately, trying to control and suppress the thoughts and fusing with the thoughts leads to rebounds and increases in the frequency, distress, and perceived "stickiness" of the thoughts.

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Does God Understand my OCD Battle?

- Our goal is to drain the thoughts of meaning and power.
- God understands that thought suppression doesn't work!
- He understands how distressing the symptoms are!
- Don't read condemnation of you and your scrupulosity into the Scripture!
- e.g., 2 Cor 10:5, "Take every thought captive" isn't a verse about thought suppression.

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Does God Understand my OCD Battle?

- You don't need to prove to yourself or to God that you don't want the thoughts, the goal is to shift toward your values and to get out of your head and into your life in the present moment!
- I highly recommend the Two-Screen Method developed by Scott Symington. His book is in the resource list.
- A quote attributed to Martin Luther is helpful: *"You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair"*

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Online Resources on Scrupulosity

- **Ted's - Scrupulosity Info:** 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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