

# Finding Rest in OCD

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rest



# Outline

- The shape of obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Some puzzles with OCD
- Three 'cognitive' components
- A biblical reframing
- Making connections with rest



# OCD

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a condition characterized by **obsessions** (intrusive and unwanted thoughts, images, or urges) and **compulsions** (repetitive behaviours and/or mental acts)



# OCD

- Typically involves:
  - Contamination – eg fear of germs
  - Responsibility for harm – eg hurting children
  - Unacceptable thoughts – eg blasphemous thoughts
  - Incompleteness – eg the need for things to be 'just right'



# OCD

- Compulsions function as 'Neutralising activities'
  - eg hand washing; checking for harm;
- Varying severity – at worst utterly debilitating
- Varying levels of insight – typically aware of irrationality



# OCD

- Incidence: about 1 in 50 people
- Fifth on the list of most common mental health disorders in the UK
- Affects men and women equally
- Onset teens / young adult (median 19 yrs)



# Discuss

- Is OCD primarily a biological problem – something wrong with our body?
- Is OCD primarily a cognitive problem – something wrong with our thinking?
- Is OCD primarily a sin problem – something wrong in relationship to God?



# 'Causes' and treatment of OCD

Occasional  
'biological'  
causation

Behavioural  
approach

Newer emphasis  
on neurocognitive  
mechanisms

Exposure and  
Response  
Prevention (ERP)

Cognitive  
therapy targets  
beliefs



# A spiritual perspective?

- What place for spiritual issues, never mind sin?
- How does the gospel speak to these things?



# ‘Cognitive Theory’

Inflated  
responsibility

Thought-  
action fusion

Intolerance of  
uncertainty



# A worked example

- Woman fearful she will harm her 5 year old child
- Avoids being alone with him
- Obsessive checking for signs of bruises or injury
- Relies on reassurance from husband
- Wretched, embarrassed; preoccupied and fearful
- Prays and prays for relief (a little obsessively) but nothing changes



# ‘Inflated responsibility’

## Intrusive thoughts are normal

- 55% crashing car
- 42% jumping off high places
- 13% violence toward loved ones



# 'Inflated responsibility'

(Rachman, 1993)

Intrusive thoughts become  
obsessional because of the value  
attributed to them and the resistance  
given to them



# ‘Inflated responsibility’

The belief that one has power which is pivotal to bring about or prevent subjectively crucial negative outcomes. These outcomes are perceived as essential to prevent.

(Salkovskis et al., 1996)



# Helping is tricky

*Disputing the validity of the obsessional thoughts doesn't work; it becomes a form of reassurance, 'meshing' with other neutralising activities*

*Therapist directed exposure can provide inappropriate reassurance and hence unwittingly lead to failure of response prevention.*



# Discussion

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*How could inflated responsibility be seen as a spiritual issue?*

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*People taking responsibility is generally a good thing – so what's the 'problem' here?*

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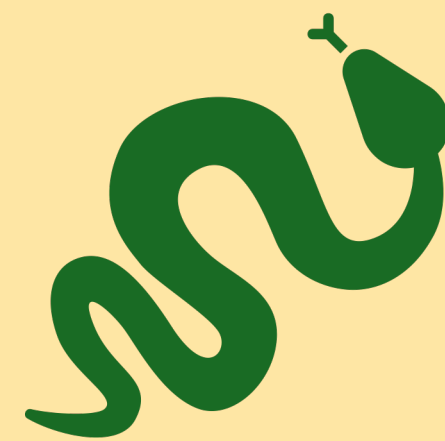
*What might it communicate about a person's relationship with the Lord?*



# Inflated responsibility & God



Who do we think we  
are?



The serpent's lure: God knows  
that when you eat from it your  
eyes will be opened, and **you**  
**will be like God**, knowing good  
and evil." (Genesis 3:5)



# ‘You will be like God’

*There is ‘the achievement of autonomy in a certain way. But only in a certain way, for the father of lies only ever speaks the truth by perverting it. In reality, the autonomy is illusory, a mere, pitiful aping of God.*

*The crazy little god with his absurd pretensions is not God and never shall be.*

*Henri Blocher, In the Beginning*



# Thought –action fusion (TAF)

TAF: variant of inflated responsibility – thinking about an action equates with performing it

Moral TAF: thinking the moral equivalent of doing  
*(eg making a deal with the devil)*

Likelihood TAF: thinking increases the likelihood of it happening



# Intolerance of uncertainty (IU)

Difficulty tolerating uncertain situations & reacting negatively to ambiguity.  
Strong emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to uncertain situations.

Rituals, avoidance behaviours, and safety behaviours understood as ways for individuals to seek certainty.



# Discussion

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Thinking in terms of grandiosity, how might we understand 'Thought action fusion' and 'intolerance of uncertainty'? Do they remind you of any biblical ideas?

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Does seeing these elements through a biblical lens help explain the intense fear experienced by someone who is struggling with OCD?



# God: All powerful (Omnipotence)

- God said 'let there be light and there was light' (Genesis 1:3)
- "I know that **you can do all things**; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)
- "LORD, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. **Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you.** (2 Chronicles 20:6)



# God: All knowing and all wise (Omniscience)

Great is our Lord and mighty in power;  
**his understanding has no limit.** (Psalm 147:5)

We know that God is greater than our hearts, and **he knows everything.** (1 John 3:20)

As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are **my ways higher than your ways**  
**and my thoughts than your thoughts** (Isaiah 55:9)



# OCD & taking God's place

- To believe our will and capacity is like God's – is profoundly disturbing
- The responsibility we feel; the damage we can do; the certainty we must have is all too great
- Repentance makes sense – we determine to stop taking God's place



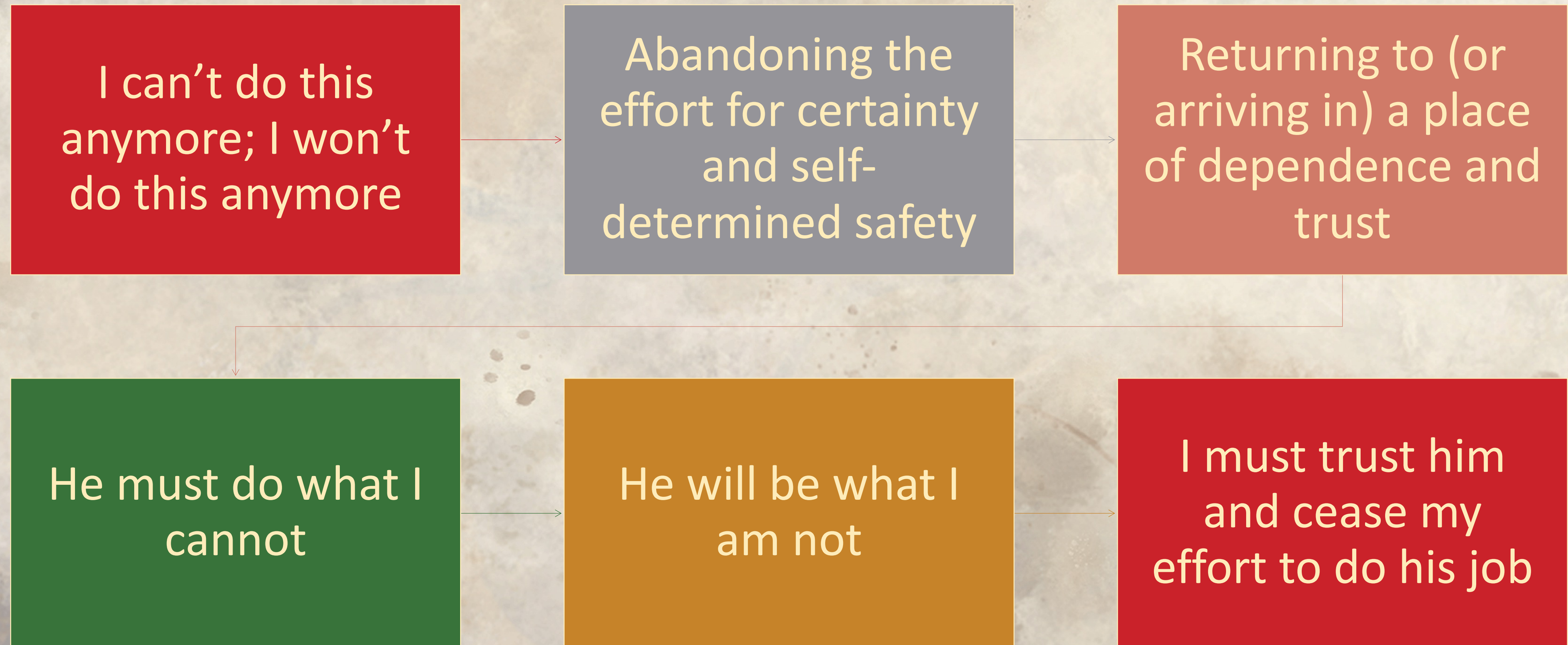
# An unusual feature

OCD improving at  
moments of exasperation

- *‘I’ve had enough of this’*
- *‘I’m just bored of this’*
- *‘Oh, hang it...’ (or other similar expressions!)*



# A moment of abandonment





# Abandonment & Rest

The seventh (rest) day when all is as it should be –  
God in his proper place and we in ours

He says, “**Be still, and know that I am God;**  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10)



# Abandonment & Rest

My heart is not proud, LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;

**I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.**

But I have calmed and quieted myself,  
I am like a weaned child with its mother;  
like a weaned child I am content. (Psalm 131:2)



# Abandonment & Rest

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find **rest for your souls**. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)



# The joy of repentance

The repenting sinner can go to God with boldness in prayer and look upon him not as a judge, but as a father. He is "born of God" and is heir to a kingdom (Luke 6.20). He is encircled with promises. He no sooner shakes the tree of the promise than some fruit falls from it.

Thomas Watson, The Doctrine of Repentance



# The joy of repentance

True faith brings “remarkable affects”: True humility. Genuine repentance. Son-like fear. Universal and absolute submission to God’s will. Patience in all afflictions. Proficiency in godliness. **Settled peace of mind**. Unspeakable joy in the Spirit.

Daniel Featley, 1626

Sanctification is the health of the soul; the soul comes to be healed when it comes to be holy; **holiness is true rest**.

Jeremiah Burroughs,  
Christ Inviting Sinners to Come to Him for Rest



# The joy of repentance

It **takes pride to be anxious** – I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Tim Keller, *Prayer* 2014



# Turning to God

1. Understanding and compassion
2. Not a rebuke but an invitation



# Conclusion

Addressing sin without intensifying guilt

Inviting rest

Reframing cognitive errors in a spiritual perspective