

“WHAT I WANT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT

# Living With OCD”

As told to HOLLY PEVZNER • Photography by KIM COOK

Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, is often misunderstood and—worse—joked about. But Harper Hanson, 17, hopes to change that.

**P**eople frequently use OCD as an adjective. They say things like “I’m *so* OCD” because they always keep their room neat or hate it when their hair isn’t perfect. Fact check: That’s not obsessive-compulsive disorder. I know because I have OCD, and it’s actually a debilitating illness, not a joke. Those comments used to make me want to hide my OCD. I was afraid of how people would react. I thought that my illness defined me—but now I know that’s not true. I’m also a 17-year-old high school senior. I’m a competitive trampolinist. I’m funny. I love to make art and read Harry Potter. And I also like to share my story so other kids with OCD will understand that they are not alone.

“OCD is an illness—not a joke.”

In this series, you’ll hear from teens across the country and have the chance to look at the world through their eyes.

KIM COOK/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC INC. (HARPER)

Playing with fidget toys helps Harper manage her anxiety.



What It Means to Have OCD

When I was little, I didn't know I had obsessive-compulsive disorder, but I did know that every single night I'd wake up terrified that a stranger was in my house. I thought that if I bolted to my parents' bedroom in under 10 seconds, we would all survive. I believed that I needed to say "good night" and "I love you" to them 10 times before going to sleep in order to be safe. And I also thought I needed to count stairs, avoid sidewalk cracks, and count to 11 in my head over and over again. I believed I had to do these things to protect my family and myself.

In my mind, these rituals were preventing bad things from happening. In reality, they were a part of my illness. When I finally learned about OCD, I discovered that my experience was similar to the experience most people with OCD have.

There's no one way to define OCD, but most of us with the illness do have the same two symptoms.

The first is obsessions, which are unwanted thoughts or urges that make you anxious. For me, that was thinking there was a stranger in my house. The second common symptom of OCD is compulsions. These are repetitive mental rituals or behaviors that people feel they must perform in order to combat their obsessions (like saying "good night" to my parents multiple times as a way to stay safe from that stranger).

So why do I think and act this way? That's a great question. Nothing caused my OCD, exactly. The disorder is partially genetic—I've learned that my dad likely has OCD too—and partially due to the way my brain functions. It's just who I am.



Books used to be a trigger for Harper. Now she loves them.

Getting Help

For a long time, I was able to live with my OCD. It didn't get in the way of going to school or hanging out with my friends, and because it was happening in my head, no one really knew what was going on—not even my parents. But the OCD became worse as I grew older. I started having thoughts about hurting myself and others, and that petrified me. I began picking at my skin too. I knew that I needed to get help.

First, my mom took me to the pediatrician. The doctor asked me all sorts of questions and determined that I definitely had anxiety. I saw a couple of other doctors after that, but it took some time before I was properly diagnosed with OCD. I learned that not all doctors are trained to recognize mental health conditions.

Now I see a therapist and a psychiatrist. With the help of my therapist, I purposefully confront the things that scare me. Doctors call these confrontations "exposures." Bit by bit, I'm learning that I can feel anxiety about these things *without* reacting to that anxiety.

For example, one of my worst obsessions used to revolve around books: I thought that if I touched or read one, something awful would happen. My therapy started by having me simply be in the same room as a book, and I slowly worked my way up until I was able to happily pick up a novel and read it. This therapy treatment doesn't get rid of my obsessive-compulsive disorder completely, and different obsessions still arise—but it definitely helps.

**My Future**

As much as I wish that I didn't have obsessive-compulsive disorder, my struggle has taught me that no one can make it through this world alone. For years, I was afraid I'd be judged if people knew what I was going through, so I remained silent. But when I finally told my friends about my OCD, they were amazingly understanding. Talking about it made it feel like a weight had been lifted. My parents, siblings, doctors, friends—even my cat, Wesley—all make me feel better in different ways.

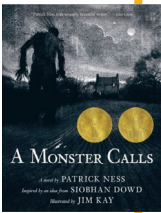
HARPER'S FAVORITE THINGS



**1. TV SHOW:** I just finished watching the BBC series *Sherlock*. I love mysteries!



**2. BOOK** *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness was so heartbreaking, but it taught me that it's good to let go of the things that cause you pain.



**3. ACTIVITY** I started competing in trampoline and tumbling two years ago. I love to feel like I'm flying.

KIM COOK/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC INC. (HARPER SITTING, HARPER JUMPING); PHOTO 12/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (SHERLOCK); CANDLEWICK PRESS (A MONSTER CALLS)

WHAT'S OCD, WHAT'S NOT	
NOT OCD	POSSIBLY OCD
Wanting a neat room. 	Cleaning your room doesn't offer any pleasure. Instead, the urge to tidy up comes from a fear that something terrible will happen otherwise.
Having occasional thoughts that you're not proud of.	Believing that any "bad" thought means you are a bad person. 
Tendency to double-check that you've completed a task. 	Feeling compelled to check something a specific number of times. This ritual may interfere with your day by, say, making you late for school.
Preferring a specific bedtime routine. 	Believing that you have to run through a specific set of actions nightly or else something negative will occur.
Having a superstition, such as believing that the number 13 is unlucky.	Having a superstition that messes with your ability to function. 
<b>THINK THAT YOU HAVE OCD?</b> Ask your parents to set up a doctor's appointment. You may have a psychological evaluation, which includes talking about your feelings and behaviors. If you're diagnosed with OCD, both therapy and meds can control your symptoms so you can focus on what matters—being a teen and having fun.	

These days, I can't *stop* talking! I want to use my voice to speak up for kids like me. I volunteer at the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a mental health advocacy group, and I recently started sharing my story at schools. I want other kids with OCD to understand that they aren't alone—and that getting help doesn't make you weak.