# **A Plan and a Path for OCD, Part One**

By: Pat Quinn



Recent ministry, conversation, and reading have led me to think more systematically and biblically about OCD and how to best help those who struggle with it. OCD—Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—is a well-documented anxiety-related disorder that reportedly affects more than three million people per year.[1] OCD is a staple of biblical counseling ministry and, in my experience, has increased during the COVID pandemic. It is a complex problem involving both physical and spiritual issues. OCD causes considerable suffering and necessitates compassionate care and godly wisdom.

My goal is to provide both a big picture plan and a more specific path to facilitate God-glorifying change in those who struggle with OCD. What follows is a plan and path involving three main steps.

* Build a **Foundation** for Change
* **Follow** the Path to Change
* **Focus** on One Area of Change

This blog will deal with Step One: **Build a Foundation for Change.**

Many OCD strugglers feel trapped in painful and unwanted thoughts and behaviors but have little understanding of the what and why of their struggle and even less hope of getting free. This is why we must begin by building a foundation for change in two ways: *educating* and *captivating*.

## **Educate**

Since OCD strugglers are often ignorant of what is happening, it is helpful to begin with some basic facts about OCD. The DSM-V is helpful in describing what OCD looks and feels like.

* ***Definition of OCD***: Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) involves recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images, particularly those considered unwanted or intrusive. These thoughts are experienced to the degree that they tend to cause anxiety and distress. Often taking an hour or more per day, such obsessions or compulsions can lead to impairment in social and/or occupational functioning.[2]
* ***Diagnostic Criteria***:
	+ Obsessions– Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced at some time during the disturbance as intrusive and unwanted.
	+ Compulsions– Repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession.[3]
* ***Underlying Causes:*** Mike Emlet’s mini-book, *OCD: Freedom for the Obsessive-Compulsive,****[4]***helps identify potential brain-based and heart influences on OCD. He identifies the following possible brain-based influences: genetics, illnesses such as influenza and strep throat, over-activity in the basal ganglia and frontal regions in the brain, and altered neurochemicals. Since we are embodied souls, it is important to carefully consider possible physiological influences on OCD. Counselees can be encouraged to see a doctor for a medical exam. Emlet also strongly encourages biblical counselors to explore potential heart issues that underly OCD, including the need for certainty, demand for control, an expectation of perfection, guilt, self-atonement, and fear of man. Much of the biblical counseling will focus on these heart issues.

## **Captivate**

Part of educating the OCD struggler is stressing that since it is a body-soul problem—involving not only nature (brain chemistry, genetics, etc.) and nurture (formative social influences and experiences), but also the human heart (desires, beliefs, allegiances, worship)—true freedom and deep change cannot come from any mere theory or therapy, but only through the Redeemer—Jesus Christ. Only Christ, through His incarnation, sinless life, suffering, death, and resurrection, can diagnose and deliver in a deep, lasting, and God-glorifying way. While attending to nature/nurture issues and cognitive/behavioral issues, we must continually captivate the mind and heart of our counselee with the all-encompassing wisdom, infinite power, and merciful love of Jesus Christ.

What follows are some New Testament passages that reveal the Messiah in action fulfilling prophetic promises and bringing forgiveness, freedom, and fullness of life. Each of these passages can be used to lead the OCD struggler to not only see the glory of Christ but to deepen trust in Him. Some guiding points and questions are provided for each passage. The counselor and counselee are invited to draw out other implications and applications.

***John 5:1-17:*** Jesus notices and heals a desperate man at the pool of Bethesda.

* The man was paralyzed—stuck in his affliction for 38 years. OCD feels paralyzing, shameful, and hopeless for many strugglers. What have you learned about this person’s experience of OCD? What is hardest for him?
* Jesus took notice and moved toward him in love—“When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time….” What else do you notice about your counselee and his present and past circumstances? What else do you want to learn?
* Jesus asked a provocative question that probed heart issues: “Do you want to be healed?” What heart issues might be contributing to this person’s OCD?
* Jesus gave the man a practical step to take toward healing. What first step of faith can your counselee take this week?

***Matthew 4:23-25*:** Jesus’ ministry then (in person) and now (through the church) centers on proclaiming the gospel, teaching discipleship, and restoring human lives. This is a good description of what biblical counselors do as well. The whole person: body and soul, sin and suffering, and all relationships are in view.

* The healing ministry of Jesus heals what is most important right away (1 Pet. 2:24) and everything else eventually (Rev. 21:3-5).[5] This has relevant implications for those struggling with the sin and suffering involved in OCD. Jesus is Lord of all common grace and special grace resources. He can use the counseling process, medication, Scripture, and prayer, all centered in Christ crucified and risen from the dead, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to bring about progressive restoration/sanctification of body and soul.
* Vern Poythress summarizes Jesus’ gospel ministry this way, “He invites all who are sick or oppressed by Satan to come. ‘Come and be healed.’ The healing is first of all the healing from sin and spiritual death. Jesus’ resurrection…reaches human need even more deeply and decisively than did the healing miracles that touched bodily needs. Jesus will bring an answer to every bodily need at the time of the consummation.”[6]
* Counselor, read Matthew 4:23-25 and notice the words: *teaching, proclaiming, healing, affliction, diseases and pains, oppressed, paralytics.* Meditate on how these specific words and Jesus’ ministry as a whole relate to your ministry to the struggler with OCD.

***Matthew 11:28-30:*** Jesus reveals Himself to be tenderly gentle and invincibly strong to those who feel weary, oppressed, and helpless. OCD is a complex and relentless foe and source of trouble. While there is a perverse logic in trying to neutralize anxious obsessions with compulsive acts, the relief is only temporary, and the “beat goes on.” This can be tremendously wearying and discouraging. Jesus shows Himself to be sympathetic, patient, and helpful to those who struggle with the pain and temptations of OCD (Heb. 2:18; 4:15-16).

* Jesus’ command to those who struggle with the weariness and weight of OCD is a kind invitation to “Come to me.” He doesn’t first lay out a program, a set of steps, or a self-help plan (the danger of introducing steps before commending Jesus is that they can feed the legalism that lurks in the heart feeding the obsessions and compulsions). Some of this may come later. First, He says, “Come to me.” He wants the struggler to know that He is the ultimate answer and cure.
* He promises the one thing that seems most elusive: “rest for your souls.” OCD is like the churning waves on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is ultimately the one who says, “Peace. Be still” (Mark 4:39). He may use a plan or steps, but He is the power of peace in our hearts.
* He tells the weary struggler to “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” He invites all of us into an intimate relationship with Him and to walk with Him through the storm until He calms it. And through this process of yoking and walking and learning and obeying—the life of repentant discipleship, He reveals His deepest heart: “gentle and lowly in heart.” O how the OCD struggler (and all of us!) long for a master, counselor, teacher, physician who is gentle and lowly, sympathetic and patient. The burden to fix yourself, measure up, “get over it,” is replaced with connecting with Jesus, depending on Him, trusting Him, learning from Him, and obeying Him. This is the primary “task” of discipleship and the beginning of healing (Isa. 53:4-5; 1 Pet. 2:24).

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. What is your experience counseling those who struggle with OCD? What themes, patterns, and heart issues have you noticed?
2. How does the person and work of Jesus influence your understanding of and response to OCD?

[1] Data from Focus Medica.

[2] Elizabeth Millard, *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: DSM Diagnostic Criteria and Treatment,* [Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Symptoms and Treatments (psycom.net)](https://pro.psycom.net/assessment-diagnosis-adherence/ocd).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Michael E. Emlet, *OCD: Freedom for the Obsessive-Compulsive*, (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2004), 6-14.

[5] Paraphrase of Sam R. Williams, *A Christian Psychology of and Response to Homosexuality*, chapel address at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 19, 2011, 15.

[6] Vern Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior’s Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2016), 117.