

To the Spiritual Mentor of Someone With Religious OCD

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Are you the spiritual mentor of someone with [religious OCD](#)? God bless you, dear soul, for bearing with us. Today's post is for you—anyone who finds themselves **offering spiritual guidance to those with an overly sensitive conscience.**

A dear, sweet woman whom I'll call Lorena emailed me this week. She's been through many dark valleys lately—not only losing several pregnancies in life-threatening ways, but also suffering immensely from religious OCD. I've been blessed to watch her take steps forward in recovering from OCD and also begin healing the [deep, jagged wounds that have built up around her relationship with God](#). It is in the hope-filled chaos of that up-and-down, forward-and-backward process that she emailed me. Lorena had opened up about her struggle to a kind member of her new church—and instead of judging her, this new friend helped her get church sponsorship for counseling *and* a spiritual mentor.

I don't know Lorena's spiritual mentor. **But this post was inspired by the immediate reaction that raced through my mind as I read that part of her email.** My reaction was a mixture of hope and fear—if Lorena is matched with a mentor who understands anxiety disorders like OCD, that relationship has the potential to be truly life-giving. If her mentor ends up being someone who makes light of mental health disorders or unintentionally presses all the wrong OCD buttons, Lorena's progress could be derailed or greatly stalled.

I've compiled the following list of recommendations for clergy, spiritual directors, biblical counselors, or other faith leaders who are mentoring a person who has been diagnosed with religious OCD. This is by no means exhaustive, but I hope it can help to avoid the biggest pitfalls that I've seen in spiritual mentorship scenarios.

But to those who are earnestly doing their best as a mentor, let me add one word of encouragement to you.

I think if you follow the recommendations on the following list, you'll be well on your way to helping and not hurting the scrupulous person you're mentoring. But keep in mind:

1. **You might say and do all the right things, and that person could still feel triggered and anxious.** Don't feel bad. People with religious OCD get triggered by *everything*. Ask them why they were bothered by what you said—it will often reveal some of the cognitive distortions related to OCD.
2. A person's "awakening" to their condition with religious OCD is a sensitive subject. It cannot be forced or rushed. If you as a biblical counselor or clergy can see all the signs of scrupulosity but that person is convinced it's all "real" and "from God," be patient and keep meeting with them. **If they are resistant to the idea of OCD, slowly and patiently question their view of God as it is being skewed by the anxiety disorder.** "Is God *really* like that?"

With that being said, let me go on to my list of recommendations, which assumes that the individual you are mentoring already has a professional OCD diagnosis and is accepting of that fact.

How to Spiritually Mentor Someone with Religious OCD: Some Recommendations

If you are someone with religious OCD and you're being spiritually mentored by someone, feel free to print this article and hand it to your mentor.

If They...	Don't	Do
Ask the same spiritual questions over and over, even though they seemed satisfied the last time you advised them	Don't go down the endless rabbit trail of questions with them. OCD has never lost a battle. There will always be another "yes, but...." no matter how well you answered the question.	Emphasize that we are saved by faith, not intellectual achievement, and that it's okay to not have all the answers and closure that we crave. There is the "OCD mind," and there is the "sound mind" of 2 Timothy 1:7. Show why God doesn't need us to figure everything out NOW but can wait and walk with us till we manage our anxiety disorder and reach the place of having a "sound mind" again. Nearly every scrupulous concern is something that can be revisited days, weeks, or months later when they are in a sounder, not-so-frantic state of mind.

<p>Admit having strange, unwanted, blasphemous, or disrespectful thoughts about God</p>	<p>Don't ask them to argue against these thoughts—arguing against intrusive thoughts is the number one reason for psychological breakdown in individuals with religious OCD.</p>	<p>Encourage a faith based approach for dealing with unwanted thoughts. For example, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 says the way we bring our thoughts into captivity is through “weapons” that are not carnal (human-powered) but are “mighty in God.” The solution to intrusive thoughts is to ignore them and trust God to take them away. Scripture is replete with passages about trust and reliance on divine power, and these can be very helpful. Most people with religious OCD have an overactive sense of personal responsibility, so it can be very helpful to have support/accountability as they learn to “let go” and trust God.</p>
<p>Describe physical sensations that make them feel abandoned by God or possessed by an evil spirit</p>	<p>Don't assume these thoughts are spiritual warfare or a genuine faith problem. Don't try to cast anything out of this suffering person—it WILL give the OCD new issues to obsess over.</p>	<p>Share passages about the deceitfulness of the human heart and the unreliability of human emotions. If you have personal experiences you can share about times when your own feelings or impressions were off, this can also be helpful. People with religious OCD tend to feel isolated as they see other “super Christians” having constant joy and always-correct spiritual “impressions.”</p>
<p>Express anxiety or discouragement about not feeling “sure” or “certain” about important spiritual truths</p>	<p>Don't tell them to “have more faith” or try to pray away the uncertainty. Don't try to argue with their OCD questions or provide extensive reassurance for their questions (even if they seem to be very good and important spiritual questions—remember, there will always be another “yes, but...!”)</p>	<p>Help them lean into passages speaking about divine mystery and admitting the limitations of human knowledge. Resist the urge to reassure them too much, as this is unhelpful in the long term. Reassurance will help for a day, but mentoring them through the process of living by faith rather than by sight will serve them for a lifetime.</p>

<p>Appear frantic to solve spiritual or moral questions</p>	<p>Don't rush to help them "solve" their concern. Beware of assuming that this "urgency" about moral/spiritual matters is the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Urgency is one of the hallmark features of a religious compulsion.</p>	<p>Remind them of God's patience and encourage them to wait before responding to their urgent thoughts. If they can be assisted in waiting out the obsession (which may take anywhere from a few days to a few months), most people will see their obsessional thinking shift to a different area of concern or it will simply be forgotten. Help them analyze the differences between how they notice OCD speaks versus how God speaks.</p>
<p>Express feelings of anger, betrayal, apathy, or frustration with God</p>	<p>Don't assume they are unconverted, and don't try to lead them through a prayer of salvation. Many of God's people throughout Scripture had their moments of angst. Don't ask them to question their religious experience or "dig" for hidden sin (they are already doing torturously more of that than you can imagine.) Don't use toxic positivity or try to guilt trip them to gratitude faster than they're ready for it.</p>	<p>Help them lean into the experience of emotional expression, vulnerability, and honesty with God. Psalms and Lamentations are good books here. Many people with religious OCD have their picture of God skewed by their anxiety disorder and will benefit from reminders about the approachable, caring, understanding heart of God. Take care, though, that they do not try to extract from you such a level and frequency of "reminders" about God's heart that this ends up becoming compulsive reassurance-seeking.</p>
<p>Have religious habits or behaviors that seem extreme or legalistic, and may be constantly seeking advice on whether or not certain behaviors are "okay"</p>	<p>Don't let yourself become the decision-maker over their spiritual life. People with OCD suffer from chronic uncertainty and love to hear other people give decided "yeses" or "no's" to their moral dilemmas. While you can help and guide, beware of the tendency for them to become overly reliant on a spiritual mentor to be their conscience for them.</p>	<p>On some matters (particularly those which would impact their future or other people), help guide them to a correct decision—not by making an authoritative statement but by helping them see the truth. Together, analyze the manner, purpose, and fruit of how God speaks—then contrast this with OCD. Other matters which are less consequential can be handled with an "I don't know" approach. Help them learn to build up their toleration for uncertainty by going forward with a decision even when they are only partially convinced. Teach them to take "risks" in trusting God (that is, they</p>

		are making the best decision they can, but there is always a risk that they didn't get the God-memo correct. Ask them what they think God's reaction will be if they make an honest mistake in their relationship with Him.
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Blessings on Our Spiritual Mentors

If you are the spiritual mentor of someone with religious OCD, I would like to thank you. From the entire population scrupulosity sufferers, I would like to take a moment to appreciate those who pour their heart and soul into helping us. We unload our mass of messy thoughts upon you, you help us sort them all out, and then we do it again the next day.

We know it's exhausting. We know you're doing your best. All those times that it seems like you can never really give us a satisfactory answer? All those times when we start re-questioning everything we already worked through together? Please know that it's not YOU, it's [our brains refusing to be satisfied with any answer you give it.](#)

Thank you for taking the time to love someone with OCD. We know it's not easy, but **we appreciate you sticking with us and helping us to re-envision Jesus in a healthy way.**

Thank you, and may God bless you for caring enough to read an article like this!

Best wishes on the journey,