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HEALTHY

Why Target's OCD Shirt Doesn't Bother Me, But My Friends' Comments About OCD Do

Getting upset about a sweater doesn't change our culture's portrayal of this OCD, but talking openly about the disease can make a difference.

PEGGY CAROUTHERS · DEC 7, 2015

My friend Jen straightens the magazines on her table and laughs. "I'm so OCD about that," she says, expecting me to laugh too, or name some of my own quirks.

Instead, my jaw clenches, and I change to subject. I can't tell her about my own quirks, because mine are real. I actually have OCD, and it's absolutely terrifying.

I live in fear every day. My heart races every time I take a wrapper off my food, because I am afraid that garbage, even perfectly clean garbage, will contaminate me. Whenever I have to touch a doorknob, I have to wipe my hands as hard and fast as I can on my jeans until it "feels right."

I had to quit playing piano because if I played a song wrong something bad would happen, even though I didn't know what, and I had to play the song over and over again until I got it all right. Sometimes it took hours.

But these aren't things I can actually discuss with people, because it makes them uncomfortable or because it makes them think I'm crazy.

Jen doesn't have OCD. I know because we've been friends for a long time, and if she did, she wouldn't use the name of her disease as an adjective. "OCD" is a noun. People with OCD say, "I have OCD," because it's the abbreviated name of the actual disorder.

In my experience, people with OCD don't usually talk about their obsessions and compulsions, and if they do, it's not in such a casual way. There's a big difference between the obsessions that people with real OCD have and the little quirks that everyone has.

While someone with quirks may be annoyed that her phone apps aren't organized the way she likes after a factory reset, a person with OCD is constantly afraid, and those fears go far beyond what we see in the media.

This casual treatment of OCD as something cute and funny is everywhere in movies, magazines, on the radio, and even at Target.

Hanging next to a black sweater that says "on the naughty list," there is a red one that says in big green block letters "OCD," and under that in slightly smaller white, green, and grey text, says, "Obsessive Christmas Disorder."

Many people have called the company out for this sweater's insensitivity towards people with OCD. Yes, it's just a sweater, and it's an attempt to create a joke about how crazy people get about Christmas. And, yes, I can see why people think it's offensive, but as a person with real life OCD, I don't think the sweater is that big of a deal.

Let's be real, some people actually are obsessive about Christmas, and it doesn't mean they have OCD. It's also true that utilizing the acronym famous for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a little insensitive, but it doesn't hurt me.

Do I like the sweater? No. The sweater is ugly, and I definitely wouldn't wear a shirt making light of something so terrible, but I can't summon the energy to get offended. If I let every little trivializing reference like this bother me, I would be constantly angry at our culture. The sweater is just a symptom of a much larger problem, and getting mad over it is kind of pointless.

But there is one part of our culture that does offend me, and that's people talking like my friend, Jen. More than a stupid sweater, I find it much more concerning that I hear people talk about OCD virtually every day and compare their own weird behaviors to this disorder.

OCD isn't just about having things set up a certain way or liking an object to be neat, though those can be facets of the disease. In reality, these are often joined by other fears, such as the fear of being contaminated by every day items, having inappropriate thoughts about people, or having accidentally killed someone. (Yes, it can be that intense.)

The disorder even goes beyond being afraid of something or specific actions. Someone might have to check the locks of their house seven times or else. This "or else" can be specific, like "or else my mom will die," or it can be just a vague terror that something awful will happen if they don't do an action or avoid a trigger.

When you have OCD, even though you know that drawing a connection between checking your household locks and your mother's death is absurd, your brain reacts very much as if it were real.

In my own experience, my body's fear responses begin to function as if someone were chasing me with a knife, even though nothing is really happening. When confronted with a trigger, such as garbage, my heart pounds in my chest, I may start to shake, and I get this intense ball of stress and fear in my chest that won't go away. I start to think about how a wrapper I just pulled off my straw will contaminate me and make me sick, and I panic. I know it's crazy, but I can't control it at all.

These fears create weird behaviors, or rituals and compulsions, which must be performed so that the "or else" doesn't happen, or so that we don't have to have that stressful ball of fear in our chests.

For me, intensely wiping or washing my hands can temporarily relieve those fears and make me feel a bit better. The problem is that while wiping my hands or washing them isn't that big of a deal, the amount of time spent on actions like this every day starts to take over my life.

My knuckles start to bleed from washing my hands 30 or more times a day, because I have to do it until it feels right. I have to go out of my way to wash my hands in the middle of the day because they feel dirty, even if they aren't. If I can't wash my hands, I have to rub my hands vigorously against my pants until they burn so that I'm sure the contaminating germs are gone.

And it isn't just that one thing. I have to check my alarm over and over until it feels right, or else I'll get in trouble at work, and then I'll be fired, and then I'll be poor, and then I'll be homeless, and then what will I do? The thoughts just kind of spiral into this huge abyss of stress and chaos, and that's just a few of my issues.

Most people have these kinds of thoughts at some point, but imagine that your whole day is consumed by these types of thoughts and fears, and you still have to be a functional adult. I live in terror daily.

OCD isn't cute. It isn't quirky. It isn't just something you can dismiss. And yet I hear people talking about my issues every day without ever really understanding, and I can't do anything about it.

Sure, I can talk about it, but that's often the last thing most people with OCD want to do. Part of the stress of OCD is appearing normal when your brain absolutely is not normal, and in telling someone about it, I am admitting that I'm not.

If I were to tell my friend Jen that I really suffer from OCD and what that's like, I know she would be supportive. She would stop talking about it like that, and she would try to help me. But she can't help, and by being honest about it, I become crazy. I become a victim. I become weird, and I'm so sick of being weird.

I shouldn't have to tell every person I meet what it's like living with OCD to get them to stop acting like my disease is a cute excuse for being anal, but right now I do because we live in a world where people get upset about stupid sweaters instead of actually having real conversations about OCD and what it's like to live with that disease.

So here I am telling everyone: I am weird. I am abnormal. I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It's not cute. It's not a joke. OCD is terrifying. Please stop getting offended by sweaters, and try talking about this disease.

And please, for the love of God, stop saying you're "so OCD."