Common Cognitive Distortions Used by People with OCD

Intolerance of Uncertainty: the belief that one must obtain absolute certainty, a 100% guarantee of safety. Any doubt, ambiguity, or the potential for a negative outcome is unacceptable.

I know my doctor said I likely don't have cancer, but I need her to order a PET scan, do a biopsy, and several other things before I can rest.

Pathologist getting in trouble for not meeting RVU expectations because she is spending too much time reading slides.

Reporter not making it to scenes due to retracing his route over and over to be certain he didn't run over someone.

Intolerance of Anxiety: the belief that one cannot tolerate a persistence of anxiety and that one must do something to reduce the anxiety, to escape; the belief that continuing to experience anxiety will lead to a negative outcome.

If I cannot figure out for sure that I didn't run over someone on my way to work, I am not going to be able to function at work.

Overestimation of threat: exaggeration of the likelihood of something bad happening or exaggerating the seriousness of any negative outcomes.

The risk of getting HIV is very high (for me).

All or nothing/black and white thinking: unwillingness or inability to see shades of gray

I am either all clean or all dirty. I am completely right or completely wrong. I am entirely moral or entirely immoral.

Emotional Reasoning: the acceptance of one's own emotions as fact, the assumption that danger/guilt is present just because it feels that it is

Because I feel guilty at work, I must have done something unethical.

Magical thinking: the belief that one event will/does happen as a result of another without a logical link of causation, the belief that the usual laws of nature/of the universe don't apply

If I don't flip the light switch 20 times, my house will burn down. If I think about a personal with low intelligence while touching my head, I will lose my intelligence.

Inflated sense of responsibility: Sense that one has much more ability and responsibility to prevent harm than is actually true, belief that failure to prevent harm is as bad as causing harm.

It is up to me to double check all of my colleagues MRIs because if I don't, something will be missed and a patient might be harmed.

Thought control: the belief that one should be able to control their thoughts and over-attribution of significance to thoughts

If I was more moral/religious, I would be able to stop myself from having images of having sex with Jesus.

Thought-action fusion (a type of magical thinking): the belief that thoughts can influence reality, the belief that having a bad thought is as bad as doing the bad thing.

If I think about my mom being in a car accident, it's more likely to happen.

If I have a disturbing thought about having sex with a child, it means I'm a pedophile. (also – thought control)

Catastrophizing: imagining the worst-case scenario or disastrous outcome, magnifying the importance of bad things (e.g. mistakes)

I might have been offensive in one of my emails to my supervisor. He is probably really upset and will hold that against me for the rest of my career. I will lose his respect, and I won't be able to achieve anything worthwhile in my job. I will be stagnant and anxious for the rest of my career.

Discounting the positive: Acknowledging but discounting positive feedback or events. Choosing to interpret the evidence in a way that supports our pre-existing beliefs.

I honored everything in the first two years of medical school except anatomy. I had to work really hard for this so I'm clearly not intelligent enough to be a doctor. If I was intelligent enough, it would have come easily and naturally.

That stranger told me I was beautiful. She must have felt really sorry for me, so much that she wanted to somehow make me feel better.

I know that every time I've turned around and checked in the past, I've never found a body. But I just KNOW this time is different.

Selective abstraction/mental filter: Drawing conclusions from isolated details and events without considering the bigger picture. Noticing only the evidence that supports your fear. Not noticing the positive.

Black car example.

Person with fear of catching HIV notices sores, wounds, bandages on everyone around him. He thinks he is cursed because why else would he be exposed to so much potential for illness?

Mind reading: believing/assuming you know what other people are thinking. (can lead to projective identification)

My colleague hasn't answered my email because she is irritated with me.

My wife is being quiet this morning so she must be upset with me.

Personalizing: taking everything personally or excessively assigning blame to oneself

My friend must not have brought her daughter with her to my party because she has suspicions that I am a pedophile.

It is my fault that my colleague's daughter didn't get the job – I'm sure I said something inappropriate in my letter of recommendation.

I'm sure my coworker asked to be moved away from me because I smell like poop.

Perfectionism/always being right: the belief that one must always be right, correct, or accurate.

I honored everything except anatomy so there must truly be something wrong with my intelligence.

I cannot tolerate the feeling I have if I don't step on each crack in exactly the same way.

If I don't perfectly explain my symptoms to my doctor (in exquisite detail), she might misdiagnose me and not provide the right treatment.

My supervisor praised me for staying late and putting in extra hours, but she doesn't know that I occasionally go home early. I need to make sure she knows this so that her praise is not misguided.