

Orthodox Jewish Mental Illness Vignettes

Scrupulosity (Religious OCD) Vignette

Binyamin is 19 years old and lives at home while learning at an ‘in-town’ yeshiva (center for Jewish religious studies)¹. Binyamin has difficulty with davening (prayer). He thinks that he does not have enough kavana (concentration), and as a result he feels compelled to repeat the first line of the Shema (a part of davening) over and over again. In one part of davening, he feels unable to continue unless he repeats the words five times. Consequently, shacharis (the morning service) can take him an extra hour to complete, and yet when finished, Binyamin still feels that he did not have enough kavana and that his prayers were not niskabel (accepted). Recently, Binyamin saw a sign in shul (synagogue) that warned of the importance of tefilin (phylacteries) and explained in detail the relevant halachos (laws). Since then, he has become preoccupied with ensuring that his tefilin are properly positioned, that they are lying directly on his head, and that the retzu’os (straps) are completely black with no stains or marks. Binyamin checks his tefilin, their position, and his retzu’os throughout davening and he finds himself worrying about them while learning. These worries increasingly consume his daily life, and those around him have become concerned.

Non-Religious OCD Vignette

Binyamin is 19 years old and lives at home while learning at an ‘in-town’ yeshiva (center for Jewish religious studies). Binyamin has difficulty with his front door. Whenever leaving his house, he thinks that he has not locked the door and he feels compelled to return to his door over and over again to check that it is locked. He also feels unable to leave his home unless he looks over his front windows five times, to check that they are not broken. Consequently, it can take Binyamin an extra hour to leave his house and get to yeshiva, and yet, when he leaves, he is still concerned that his door is not locked. Recently, Binyamin saw a sign in the street warning about open manhole covers during construction. Since then, he has become preoccupied with ensuring that all the manhole covers in the street are closed, that they are lying flat and level with the road,

and that there are no gaps between the covers and the holes. Binyamin checks manhole covers whenever he goes to yeshiva and he finds himself worrying about them throughout his way to yeshiva. These worries increasingly consume his daily life and those around him have become concerned.

Source: Pirutinsky, S., Rosmarin, D. H., & Pargament, K. I. (2009). Community attitudes towards culture-influenced mental illness: Scrupulosity vs. non-religious OCD among Orthodox Jews. Manuscript in preparation.

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