

Abnormal Psychology: Case Study

Case Study 1: Maria: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

The Case

Maria is a 38-year-old homemaker in a middle-class suburb of Pittsburgh. She and her husband have been married for 16 years and have four children (three sons and a daughter) ages 15, 12, 9, and 7. Maria and her husband, Alfonso, are both children of Mexican immigrants, were raised in a strict Catholic home, and they have continued this religion tradition in their own family, raising their children to be devout Catholics. Maria has been very disciplined in her religious practices and often worries if she is devout enough. In the past, she has worried about whether or not she has performed the various rituals correctly; however, these worries have become markedly more intense recently, leading her to perform rituals that occupy several hours every day. Her increased anxiety toward the religious rituals has manifested by becoming obsessed by remaining pure and holy, which have resulted in frequent hand washings and cleaning so she would feel as pure and clean as possible.

Throughout her life, Maria has been neat and orderly, valuing cleanliness and a disdain for clutter. She always put great effort into keeping her house clean and tidy and was also careful in her personal habits. In earlier years, in the course of a day, Maria would brush her teeth three or four times and wash her hands perhaps six to eight times. However, in the past couple of years, her obsession with religious rites and cleanliness has led to an extreme compulsion to wash her hands for six to eight hours each day, often to the point where her hands would become cracked, raw, and bloody. In the past year, Maria's compulsion with cleanliness has escalated to a point where she spends hours scrubbing fixtures that are already gleaming and wiping furniture that shows no signs of dust.

However, perhaps the most tragic aspect of Maria's recent downturn in her illness concerns her relationship with her family. Maria began insisting that her family constantly wash their hands and take frequent showers, which has caused her to become alienated from those she loves. She is afraid to touch or kiss her children because of fear of contamination. It has been more than a year since she last kissed her husband or children.

Childhood Background

Maria is the second of five children, with an older brother and three younger sisters. Although Maria describes her upbringing as very strict, she denies any cruelty or abuse, although she states her home life was oppressive as far as having many rules to follow. When she was in adolescence, she began her long history of mild obsessions and rituals. For example, she frequently would have notions that some numbers were "good" and others were "bad" which would lead her to minor compulsions such as turning light switches on or off a certain number of times, buying a certain number of items at a store, or inviting a particular number of guests to a party. She was also raised with a mother who was highly superstitious. For example, her mother was an avid gardener and would enjoy many different types of flowers; however, after seeing petunias at a friend's funeral once, she stopped growing them because of the fear that they would bring "bad luck."

Maria's family history shows no evidence of any mental illness; however, one of her sons was diagnosed with ADHD a few years ago and prescribed a strong medication for that disorder. In addition, Maria's daughter has become involved in a ritual of cutting herself.