



Obsessed: How OCD Can Make You Chase Friendships

By: Katherine Brown

Recently, I listened to a very thought-provoking podcast. The topic of the podcast was reaching out to people vs. chasing people. The speaker recounted his experiences as a church leader, struggling to learn the difference between healthily reaching out to attendees, or recklessly chasing them down with no real purpose. As I listened, I related to many of the things he said.

Honestly, we've probably all chased a friendship at one point in our lives. Perhaps you reached out to an acquaintance to hang out, and they just weren't receptive to you. Or, maybe you tried to uphold an old friendship that had clearly become one-sided. These occurrences are probably quite common among people.

However, when does chasing a friendship go too far? When does it become....*obsessive*?

I, unfortunately, have crossed into "obsessive" territory in a few of my friendships.

It went like this: I would meet a person and we would become close friends. However, whenever the friend began to disappear from my life (for reasons unrelated to me), I tried to hang onto

them. I tried my hardest to engage with them. I texted them, I called them, and I emailed them, all to no avail.

However, in my quest to hold onto the friendship, I literally became obsessed with the person. I didn't mean to. But by the time I had pondered what happened to the friendship, analyzed the situation over and over again, and repeatedly contacted the person, I was obsessed.

Usually when you think about obsession, you think about some deranged, psychopathic stalker in a horror movie, terrorizing his victim. However, this notion is completely false. What the obsessive person is actually experiencing could be a form of OCD, which stands for obsessive compulsive disorder. OCD is a mental health disorder in which a person experiences excessive thoughts (obsessions), which lead to repetitive behaviors (compulsions).

A psychologist also dispels this mainstream theory. Speaking of articles he had found in his local library that spread false information about OCD, he wrote, "To the uninformed reading these, it would appear that people with OCD are either a bunch of dangerous sweet-talkers, or delusional or violently jealous maniacs, posing a risk to anyone foolish enough to get into a relationship with them and who then want to break up. While I was aware that this misconception existed, it seemed to me to be more widespread than I had ever imagined. How could they be so ignorant? After all, these articles were from widely distributed popular magazines. There are those with OCD who actually have obsessions which involve others. I have met and treated quite a few over the years, but they are hardly dangerous, delusional, or violent" (Penzel, 2019, p.1).

Another article notes, "Now, people often associate the word "obsession" with someone who is mentally unstable; however, in this case, the person with OCD is coping with a chemical imbalance in their brain. They're not "unhinged", they have OCD. When someone with OCD fixates on a person, it can become obsessive" (Miguel, 2019, p.1).

The obsessive thoughts cause you to wonder over and over again why the person won't talk to you, or why the relationship has ended. You can't understand why the person is ignoring you. This, subsequently, makes you want to engage the person, asking what the issue is. When you do try to engage the person, they continue to ignore you, fueling the confusion, and consequently, the obsessions. It turns into a continuous cycle that your brain can't seem to stop.

"Generally, the OCD sufferer, when tortured by doubts, may repeatedly question or search for information. This may be the result of the individual with OCD being unable to process information on their particular obsessive topic. The more they question, the more the doubts increase" (Penzel, 2019, p.1). At times, it can feel like you're going crazy. In the past, when my friendships dissolved, I often wondered if I and the person were really ever friends in the first place, if I had overestimated the friendship, if I had misinterpreted our interactions, and so on. All the thinking made my head hurt. Obsessive thoughts can make you feel like you're losing your mind.

These obsessions, "are usually accompanied not only by compulsive rumination and analysis, but frequently by attempts to question the other person, either face-to-face, by phone, mail, or via a third party or parties" (Penzel, 2019, p.1).

I myself have done this. If my friend didn't respond to me the first time, I often reasoned in my head that she didn't get my message for some reason. So, I came up with a different method of

contacting her. If she didn't respond to my text message, I would call her. If she didn't respond to my call, I would email her. If she didn't respond to my email, I would ask a mutual acquaintance if she was okay, and so on.

While most people would be able to move on after a while, a person with obsessive thoughts can't let it go. For example, if your best friend suddenly stopped talking to you without warning or explanation, you would be confused and upset, and understandably so. But, if your best friend is absolutely refusing to talk to you, you would move on from the friendship. However, a person with obsessive thoughts would just keep trying to engage their best friend, intent on finding out what the issue is - even when the person isn't responding to their messages or calls. The person with OCD might send message after message, and even try to approach their best friend in person to talk. This could go on for days, weeks, months, and even years.

"The person with OCD may go to great lengths to pursue the person to ask their relentless questions. The other person may, at times, be driven to seek legal help, such as an order of protection, fearing harm from the person with OCD, not realizing the actual basis of the pursuit. The harassment here is unintentional on the OCD sufferer's part, but it does turn out this way, unfortunately. The disorder can become so all-consuming that they may overlook the needs of others without meaning to" (Penzel, 2019, p.1).

While it may seem obvious to you that this behavior is inappropriate, it's not obvious to the person with OCD. OCD sufferers might not realize what they're doing crosses the line. They're not trying to harass the person, and their intention isn't to harm them. A psychologist writes, "I have never heard of anyone being harmed by a person with such an obsession" (Penzel, 2019, p.1). In my own friendships, I didn't mean to harass or annoy the person - I only wanted to know why she had stopped talking to me. When I behaved the way I did, it didn't occur to me that what I was doing (the questions, the continuous attempts at contact, etc.) was inappropriate. I didn't mean to harass or hurt anyone at all.

One of the worst consequences of these types of situations is that close relationships can be lost due to the OCD sufferer's behavior and persistent questioning. An article notes that, "Gradually, this questioning strikes the other person as strange and begins to bother or annoy the other person who is being questioned inappropriately. They may respond with annoyance, graduating to hostility and in many cases, withdrawal from the relationship and finally from all contact with the OCD sufferer" (Penzel, 2019, p.1). The end of the relationship can be especially stressful to the person with obsessive thoughts. An article says, "This withdrawal, of course, only serves to increase the sufferer's distress due to both rejection by the other person, and to their source of information being cut off" (Penzel, 2019, p.1). While I've never personally lost a friendship because of my obsessive thoughts, I have been met with annoyance and confusion when I've contacted someone in an inappropriate manner.

For the past few years, I committed to not chasing friendships, only to chase someone again months later. This happened over and over again. I couldn't figure out why it was so difficult for me to stop this frustrating behavior. It was a pattern that my brain just couldn't seem to get under control. What I didn't know at the time was that this behavior was a manifestation of OCD.

Fortunately, OCD can be treated. CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) is a therapy method commonly used for OCD patients, and medication can also be helpful. With proper treatment, the OCD sufferer can recover and take back control of their life.

OCD is a real monster, and it makes people (including myself) act in ways that would seem unimaginable to them otherwise. My goal for this article is to inform others that a person's behavior or intentions might not always be what they seem, and that it could actually be related to OCD or another type of mental disorder.

And, while this article specifically discussed people who struggle with OCD, I want to note that chasing a friendship is an unhealthy behavior for anyone, regardless of if you have OCD or not. It's important to have healthy, reciprocal friendships in your life - not ones that make you feel like you're constantly begging for the other person's attention.

*Note: In a previous article, I discussed the very important topic of harassment. Harassment and OCD are NOT the same thing. OCD does NOT correlate to harassment. OCD sufferers have a real mental health disorder, and that doesn't apply to a neighbor who frequently pesters you about your dog, or a coworker who routinely makes sexual comments. These harassers do not suffer from OCD - they're just harassers. If a person engages you in a threatening or intimidating way that makes you feel uncomfortable, this is not OCD - this is harassment. Please report harassers.

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