



Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior

Jeffrey M. Schwartz

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The 20th anniversary edition of the definitive classic on defeating obsessive-compulsive behavior, with all-new material from the author.

An estimated 5 million Americans suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and live diminished lives in which they are compelled to obsess about something or to repeat a similar task over and over. Traditionally, OCD has been treated with Prozac or similar drugs. The problem with medication, aside from its cost, is that 30 percent of people treated don't respond to it, and when the pills stop, the symptoms invariably return.

In *Brain Lock*, Jeffrey M. Schwartz, M.D., presents a simple four-step method for overcoming OCD that is so effective, it's now used in academic treatment centers throughout the world. Proven by brain-imaging tests to actually alter the brain's chemistry, this method doesn't rely on psychopharmaceuticals. Instead, patients use cognitive self-therapy and behavior modification to develop new patterns of response to their obsessions. In essence, they use the mind to fix the brain.

Using the real-life stories of actual patients, *Brain Lock* explains this revolutionary method and provides readers with the inspiration and tools to free themselves from their psychic prisons and regain control of their lives.

Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior Details

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Fausto Genao says

I was tempted to qualify it with three stars, but then I thought the information (in my P.V.) was actually, really good. And for people who suffer this disorder, it would be a flashlight in theirs dark and painful path. It's something more common than smallpox, and I think is good for all people, know (even a few) about this topic. (Maybe a familiar, friend or even you, could be suffering OCD).

The issues I found in the book were the constants repetitions, I know they are good to secure knowledge but God!, at one point feels like were there just for fill pages. And the book could be more practical (but actually the last pages summarize the whole steps in a very practical way).

I think this book is useful in what is trying to achieve. Give tools to fight the OCD.

Mackenzie says

Being Obsessive-Compulsive, I was recommended this book from a friend. I found it very interesting and applicable. However, I'm VERY GRATEFUL my life isn't as bad as the examples in the book! So, if anything, it's been a blessing to realize it could be much worse!

Elee Schrock says

This book was very helpful and I appreciate all of the information and tips. The only issues I had were:

1. I felt that some of this information is outdated, at least in terms of the complexities of OCD and linking a specific compulsion to a specific obsession is not always as cut and dry as he lays it out in the book (and, therefore, doesn't provide information as to what to do when an obsession doesn't result in a noticeable compulsion or how to keep from "refocusing" activities becoming compulsions in and of themselves).
2. Most of the examples in the book were very, very extreme cases. I wish he had also focused on cases that are still as frustrating and intrusive, but not as blatantly debilitating as the examples he chose.
3. He was often extremely redundant and I truly feel the book could have been about a quarter of the length, because no new information really popped up. His structuring was also odd – it seemed that he would just want to add in bits of people's stories, but the stories or quotes didn't necessarily correspond to what he was talking about at that moment.

However, despite these issues, the information relayed is very useful.

Rebecca says

This book was a great text for OCD using cognitive behavioral therapy as the guide. By rigorously practicing the four R's, people who suffer from OCD can alter their brain chemistry and improve their "brain lock."

This book was especially helpful in explaining the exact biological causes of OCD - rooted in malfunctioning of the caudate nucleus and orbital cortex. In addition, if you suffer from a moderate form as I do, reading the examples in the book will actually make you thankful that you don't have it on the same level as the patients in the UCLA program.

My only slight qualm with the book was the frequent classification of medication as "waterwings." For some people who have very mild symptoms, CBT could very well be enough. But for a good amount of people, both medication and CBT are necessary to recover. OCD is really no different than diabetes. They are both due to biological causes. Would you deny a diabetic his medication and instead say that they should only lose weight and cut out sugar? Of course not. But by doing both together, they can recover.

David says

4.5

Very useful for defining what OCD is, how it affects the brain and thought patterns, and how one can use various techniques to overcome it. The explanations of what it is and how it works were particularly helpful; a lot of thoughts and behaviors related to OCD don't make rational sense (and the patient is aware of this). When attempts to reason your way out of it don't work, this can be both confusing and scary. Understanding the fundamentals helps the patient know what they're actually dealing with.

The four step method is fairly straight forward, and as presented, the book can be fairly repetitive. That's not necessarily a bad thing though. The treatment protocol is repetitive. One potentially effective way to approach the book, if you are dealing with OCD, is to read a few pages each day. Thus, rather than get bogged down in repetition, you're being reminded daily of the principles for understanding and treating OCD and re-equipped for dealing with them.

I have some quibbles with Schwartz on a few theological points. (These points are secondary or even tertiary in terms of relevance. While Schwartz touches on the topic of 'faith and OCD' on occasion, his discussions there are not fundamental to his overall theory and treatment of OCD. You do not have to share Schwartz's or my beliefs on spirituality to find this book useful). "God helps those who help themselves," is not a biblical principle (see Rom 5:8); taken to an extreme this could possibly create a guilt complex when the patient's efforts don't appear to be working (i.e. things aren't working => I must not be trying hard enough => God won't help me because I'm failing). That point aside though, one thing Schwartz stresses, and I'd fully agree with, is don't beat yourself about OCD. Don't beat yourself up about how you feel, and don't beat yourself up when you fail (I would add that God isn't looking to beat you up over it). This is a process. It takes time to work through these issues. You aren't going to win every fight. But that's OK. Just get up and try again next time (and Schwartz's method provides a more detailed way to approach this part of the process too). I would also quibble with Schwartz's "It's not me, it's my OCD" mantra. While I'm inclined to agree with him in most cases and agree that this is a good thing to remind yourself of, there are certain areas where Schwartz applies this where it seems possible the patient might reinterpret this as sort of a "Devil made me do it" paradigm, and thus use their OCD to justify certain bad behaviors. It's a thought I would be cautious of, but as is, my understanding of OCD is not great enough for me to offer much more thought or insight on that point in this review.

Overall, however, Schwartz does offer a lot of clarity and a simple, disciplined method for approaching OCD issues. I've found this to be a valuable resource on these issues, and I would highly recommend it to anyone dealing with OCD, as well as to those who might have friends or family members dealing with OCD. I would also add in the caveat that there are some aspects of Schwartz's protocol which require working with a trained professional, and I would agree, that's a key part of the process for treating mental illnesses. All that said, on the whole, I think *Brain Lock* is a valuable resource, and I have found many of the techniques useful and effective.

Anya Weber says

I talked to my therapist recently about a troubling thought that had been in my head since junior high school. It was an irrational worry, but one that was extremely disturbing to me, and one that I'd never before been able to talk about or dismiss. "Oh, that's an obsessive thought," my shrink told me. "It's not a *real* thought. It just means your brain gets stuck in a loop sometimes. It's pretty common, and in your case it will be pretty easy to fix."

This was fascinating and liberating, and got me interested in learning more about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which thoughts like this are symptomatic of. *Brain Lock* is widely considered to be one of the best and most practical books about OCD. Its author, Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz, is a psychiatry professor at UCLA, and in this book he explains a four-step plan for self-treating this condition--which can range from the mildly annoying, to the completely debilitating.

OCD is pretty unusual as a neurological issue. It's one of very few mental disorders that *don't* respond to placebos in scientific studies. Other neurological conditions, even potentially severe ones such as some forms of schizophrenia and depression, are affected by placebos; the act of being treated for the disease, in and of itself, helps cure the disease.

With OCD, it's a different story. Placebos don't work, and meds, which they can be helpful in extreme cases, are not a cure either. It's really up to each patient to cure him- or herself. Schwartz includes tons of anecdotes in "*Brain Lock*" that are devastating, describing people whose entire lives have been blown apart by OCD. But the patients he writes about have also managed to get control of their symptoms. You don't ever *cureOCD*, but you can certainly minimize its effects in your life.

Schwartz describes common symptoms of OCD, ones that are familiar to many people from the TV show "*Monk*" or other pop-cultural portrayals of the disorder. For example, I knew that excessive hand-washing was a common OCD action. Schwartz writes about a patient who washed so much that his hands would instantly lather when he ran water over them, even without applying soap.

Another common OCD fixation is leaving the stove on or leaving an appliance plugged in. Schwartz describes a woman who could not make herself believe she'd unplugged the coffee machine--so she would carry it to work with her in a backpack.

Schwartz's research shows that OCD sufferers can literally rewire our brains to weaken the effects of compulsions and obsessions. By using his four-step method, which is very simple and clearly defined, people can actually "unlock" the affected part of the brain so that it no longer triggers OCD reactions (or at least, triggers them much more mildly).

This book is inspiring to anyone who experiences any level of obsessive or compulsive action or thought--in other words, just about everybody! And if I knew a friend or family member who was suffering from severe OCD, this book is the first weapon I'd hand them to help them fight back.

Danielle Connolly says

After reading this book, I realized I could do one of two things. I could continue to give into my obsessive urges OR I could accept the fact that the chemistry in my brain was off balance and work on changing it and start giving into my own urges.

If the patients in this book can overcome Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, anyone can.

Theresa says

Interesting book about the organic origins of OCD

Julie Christine says

I don't quite know how to rate and review *Brain Lock*, but I'll give it the old college try. Please note that several f-bombs are laced throughout my review. Profanity feels really good when it comes to fighting back.

I don't have OCD, but a friend who knows I struggle with claustrophobia and anxiety sent it along with a strong recommendation. And I'm oh-so-glad she did.

On the surface, the treatment method for OCD outlined and explained in *Brain Lock* wouldn't seem to have much to do with treating phobias. Yet, what is a phobia but an obsessive, irrational fear of harmless or even unlikely circumstances? It's not even that, really. A phobia is the fear of losing control when faced with a particular circumstance.

For me, it's getting a handle on the ridiculousness of claustrophobia that interferes with my love of travel; specifically, I fucking hate to fly. And, like, I've flown all over the world, north to south, east to west. I've had jobs predicated on the ability to travel all over, frequently, by small, steel tube with no access to fresh air for hours on end. I've been claustrophobic forever, but the flight thing just keeps getting worse. I never, ever get on an elevator, but for the most part I can work around that (recent surgery, I couldn't escape the elevator, but I was on a gurney with drugs in my system. That's how I roll). It's hard, however, to get to Vietnam, Chile, Morocco or Turkey - all places I intend to get to soon - without boarding a plane. Fuck this. I'm tired of carrying the burden of my own brain around. Enough.

I love a plan. And now I have one. The first two pages of the journal I'm taking with me to France (YES! FUCK YES! I'M GETTING ON A FUCKING PLANE IN TWO WEEKS) are filled with notes from *Brain Lock*, including the Four Steps: RELABEL, REATTRIBUTE, REFOCUS, REVALUE.

For years, I've Refocused, without even knowing I *should* be. When I feel a pre-take-off or mid-flight panic attack tickling the nether reaches of my brain, I pull out my book of NY Times Sunday crossword puzzles

and get to work. It's hard to panic when you are trying to think of the nine-letter name for a canonized Norwegian king. But I never knew the power of anticipating and accepting that I WILL start to panic, that every fiber in me will be screaming ICANTICANTICANTICANT as I walk down the jetway or when the flight attendants close the doors and I know I am TRAPPED FOR HOURS AND I CAN'T GET OUT. There's power in knowing that horror is going to happen. Knowledge is power, because it puts me in control.

The moment I read this thing, this thing about saying, "Oh, hey there, Brain. Yep, there you go, freaking out. What else is new? You've allowed in stupid obsessive thoughts, but sit down and STFU!" (Relabel & Reattribute) a light flickered on. No one ever told me I could say THAT to my brain. No one ever told me that the panic won't go away, but I don't have to DO anything about it. I don't have to try to stop it, I just don't have to ACT on it. I can carry on with the rest of my life (Refocus) and devalue the panic as worthless garbage (Revalue). This alone was worth the price of admission. I see other reviews suggesting that you skip right to the end of the book, where the four steps are explained in a handful of pages, but don't do that. It's really worth getting some background on OCD and relating it to your particular issues, even if it's not a disorder you possess.

The case studies I skipped, as well as chapters on relationships to other disorders and living with a loved one who has OCD. I was also a bit taken aback by the frequent references to God. I wasn't expecting that from a behavior therapist. It's fine, really. I'm not a religious person, but I do my fair share of appealing to a higher power. It just caught me off guard.

But I was glad to see the strong focus on mindfulness, the nuanced approach to medication (the goal being to alter your brain chemistry, thereby negating the need for medication), and the nods to meditation. I've found a couple of phobia-specific guided meditation practices that have been incredibly helpful and they will be loaded on my iPod, ready for action during that flight.

I know I'll be fine. I've made this flight dozens of times. It's never easy, but once, long ago, it was, so I know the power to change my brain and gain control over these false messages is completely within my grasp.

Forget the elevators, though. I'll walk.

Sassan says

As someone who suffers from OCD, I can say that this book helped change my life. I no longer take medication (and haven't for years) ever since reading this wonderful book and using the scientifically tested method of "relabel, reattribute, refocus, revalue". In fact, my symptoms have decreased by over 90%! While this book is for OCD, it can also be used for other related disorders, obsessions, and fixations. In fact, Dr. Schwartz shows that brain scans demonstrate by using this method, it helps facilitate neuroplasticity and brain change similar to the way that SSRIs work in the brain. A highly recommended read! :)

Karin says

Great book for people with ocd.

Good explanation of the brain and how and where ocd occurs in the brain. Then 4 steps to overcoming (minimizing, not giving in to the compulsions) ocd. And yes, sometimes that means pills.

However, their idea of 'free' is minimizing, handling the ocd. Does not mean ocd disappears for good. It means you can handle it in your life.

Aaron Rodriguez-Pupo says

Brain Lock is a must read for anyone who has OCD and wants to combat it, or wants to learn about what OCD is and what people with OCD actually experience. The book is written by a doctor who has studied OCD for years, and features first hand accounts from many patients about their symptoms, treatment, and progress.

The book is mainly centered around a four-step plan wherein a person with symptoms relabels, reattributes, refocuses, and revalues their symptoms on their own so that they can slowly start to resist their obsessions and compulsions. Dr. Schwartz backs up this plan with research showing that, over time, these steps actually rewire one's brain, and effectively "cool off" parts of the brain that are "overheated" by OCD as demonstrated by brain scans.

This same strategy can also be applied to fighting bad habits or impulse control urges. It's good advice for anyone, and the book can teach anyone a great deal about the science behind OCD, impulse control urges, and bad habits.

Still, the book is incredibly repetitive. Some quotes and sentences from later on are directly copied from earlier in the book. The author hammers in his point about the four steps over and over. While the goal may have been to get the reader to internalize the steps, that repetition can make the book feel bloated, like it's trying to hit a word count.

Still, it is worth reading if the topics discussed are things you want to learn about, and the advice is very good. I already see plenty of places where I can apply it in my own life, even as far as minor bad habits like procrastinating too much.

Critical Hysteria says

I touched the book three times then turned off the oven, again.

Vonia says

Really, the only thing I have to say is that if you actually suffer from OCD, this book is not going to help you. Maybe if you have a minor form. Basically, Schwartz teaches you to "reframe" your thoughts. Wow. This is inexplicably, by far, the most popular title out there on self-help for OCD. It might have some information for loved ones to better understand what is going on, but it will not assist a sufferer. Any professional in the field or sufferer will tell you pretty much the same thing, that there isn't much substantial information here. A title I strongly recommend instead is Doctor Jonathan Grayson's "Freedom From Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Personalized Recovery Program for Conquering Your Fears and Managing Uncertain".

David says

I thought that the numerous case studies in this book, while helpful in an empirical sense, distracted from the main thrust of the book: attempting to curb and eventually minimize OCD symptoms. It was very easy to get distracted by the stories of the patients involved in the outpatient therapy at UCLA. the four step approach seems valuable, but I think the book would benefit from some brevity and focus.
