

When Moral Concerns Become a Psychological Disorder:  
The Case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

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Preoccupation with perceived violations of one's own moral standards may have serious implications for psychopathology. Indeed, feelings and cognitions related to morality – for example, guilt and inflated responsibility – have been implicated in psychopathological processes and psychological disorders such as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression. However, sensitivity to moral issues, by itself, is unlikely to lead to an emotional disorder. Many of us experience events or thoughts challenging our moral standards but are not flooded by negative self-evaluations, dysfunctional beliefs, and pathological preoccupations. In fact, for most people, such experiences would result in the activation of distress-regulation strategies that dissipate the unwanted thoughts, reaffirm the challenged self, and restore emotional equanimity. In my talk, I will propose that dysfunctional operation of the attachment system, as manifested in heightened attachment anxiety, can disrupt the process of coping with experiences that might cause preoccupation with moral issues. I use OCD as an example of a disorder involving morality and propose a model whereby individuals with OCD focus on sensitive domains of self – domains that they view as extremely important for self-worth, such as morality. Experiences challenging such self-domains (e.g., immoral thoughts or actions) may cause an increase in the accessibility of “feared self” cognitions (e.g., I'm bad, I'm immoral). Such unwanted thoughts may activate, in some individuals, overwhelming negative evaluations in certain self-domains and other dysfunctional cognitive processes (e.g., an inflated sense of responsibility). These processes, together with malfunctioning of the attachment system, may be self-perpetuating and result in the development of obsessional preoccupations.