

Success Stories

Everything about OCD is so clear to me because I lived with it for 15 years before I got help. It is difficult to describe in words the magnitude of the internal psychological damage it can cause. It pisses me off that people think it is so easy to understand and easy to fix. How would they know? They don't have it. I will do anything I can to help educate others.... People need to be educated before someone else loses it and makes their day on the headlines.

–Eighteen year old Devin describing his frustration with people who think there is a quick fix to emotional problems.

Do the lives of violent kids ever have happy endings? They certainly do in some circumstances. This chapter will present some of the ways that kids who were initially violent learned how to cope with their anger and transform it into something productive (or at least into something not destructive). Many of these kids reached me through letters, e-mail or through personal contact and interviews. There were also adults who told me of horror stories from their junior high and high school

years and how they overcame adversity to find a way of life that was satisfying to them. Each of their stories is different: some of the kids (and adults) were able to get well on their own, some needed medication and others needed the help of an outside person or persons (and some needed a combination of these interventions). Another key to their success was the ability to find something larger than themselves that mattered to them in a way that made them feel special. I will begin this chapter with the ending to the story for Devin, the teenager in chapter four who told us his story of how he believed anger, depression and a mental disorder caused him to become violent. Devin had told us about several incidents where he had attempted to hurt or kill other kids (for the beginning of Devin's story, see chapter four). Luckily, he was smart enough to realize he needed help.

I got on an antidepressant for my OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and my life changed. The black hole I carried around inside me with all my negative feelings was gone and for the first time, I felt like a normal person and not a psycho. I look back on what I was before and what I was about to do and I now see a totally different person. Mainly, I see myself as a little boy doing all these things because he is mad at the world for how some people had treated him. I realized it was my OCD that made it that way. I talked to a psychiatrist on a regular basis and returned to the intellectual self I once was. I still have what I call "flare-ups" when I get really mad and want to hurt someone but I tell myself it is just the OCD trying to get the better half of me. I got to thinking about my parents and how they would feel if I did do something like that. I realized I loved my mother way too much to do it. The way I was before almost got me killed on occasions. I would shudder just thinking about my mom going to her son's funeral. After my last violent incident, I took my gun out of my car and never put it back. I spent a long time thinking about what I

did but I finally got over it. What led me to get better and kept me sane is a strong family support system. My mother was keen enough to notice the difference between me on meds and off. She said it was like a Dr. Jekyll (sic) and Mr. Hyde thing. When I got angry sometimes I would lose the motivation to take meds and feel better. My mother noticed the difference and forced me to take it all the time, leaving me no room to go bonkers. With this type of OCD, you can't just give a kid some meds and send him home and expect him to become a choir boy. It was a conscious effort with the Dr., the patient, and the FAMILY of the patient. For a while I was left to take the meds by myself in the beginning but if I missed one day, I would get very irritable and would be less likely to take it the next day. The less I would take it, the more erratic my thoughts would become. You asked me if I thought the psychiatrist I saw helped me. I live in a small sports driven town (much like the town of Littleton, Colorado) and a town this small does not have the facilities to properly treat someone like me so my family had to improvise. This doctor did the same thing that Eric's (Harris, one of the Columbine killers) did. Gave him meds and wrote him off. In retrospect, I think no wonder he went nuts. My doc diagnosed me and said "he'll be fine as long as he stays on the pills." But it was real hard to stay on the meds and look at the bright side when the dark side is always thrust right into your face by other people. I don't like my doctor. He is arrogant and he doesn't listen. The medicine helps, as long as you take the right amount consistently. The first time you miss a day and get angry you can kiss that wonder drug goodbye. It takes 5 days of consistently taking your meds just to recover from one day of missing it. It is much easier to be sick than to get better. Getting better requires too much effort. I would try to get better but that would mean I had to get up and take my meds everyday (with his mother's help, this is what he did). I decided to start college early and now I am fine.

Devin got better with the help of medication to treat his disorder, strong family support and a return to “the intellectual self” he once was. Once his thinking process improved with the help of medication, he was more amenable to the possibility of change. Of course medication is not always the answer but sometimes it can play an important role in a kid’s emotional recovery (see more about the role of medication in chapter nine on Frequently Asked Questions). But there were two other factors in Devin’s success: his mother being aware and sensitive to her son’s mood changes and a desire on Devin’s part to find that part of himself that he had lost—his inquisitive mind. Eric Harris, despite being seemingly intelligent, lacked the one thing that Devin had on his side—a positive role model involved in his life who would let him know when he was stepping over the line of sanity. In one of the video tapes made before the Columbine killing spree, Harris poked fun at his mother for being unaware of his darker side. Harris and Klebold recounted several episodes in which they said their plans might have been interrupted if their parents had interceded. In one incident, Harris talks about walking by his mother with the end of a shotgun protruding from his bag. In another segment of the tape, he exclaims, “Thank God, my parents never searched my room.” As he is leaving his room, he pretends his mother has just walked in. “Looks good, son” he says, as if to mock her.¹

It seems fairly simplistic to say that kids need adults (or smart peers) in their lives who can tell them when they are crossing the line between sanity and insanity. But sometimes a good mentor can literally make the difference in whether a kid crosses that line. For example, one day, at work, a seventeen year old boy came into my office for an evaluation. He was psychotic (not in touch with reality) and told me he heard voices telling him to “kill people,” yet he had never acted on these voices. When I asked him what had kept him from doing what the voices said, he smiled and said, “because of my grandmother.” “Oh,” I said, “what does she do?” to which he replied, “she comes to my house everyday and tells me the voices

aren’t real. I listen to her, I always have.” Now the grandmother approach may not be for everyone, but for this particular boy, it meant the difference between him living his life at home as opposed to a jail cell or mental institution. I can hear psychiatrists across the country shaking their heads in disbelief at this “simplistic solution.” Many of them wonder drugs do work miracles but would the change in the emotionally disturbed be any less dramatic if each of them was assigned a “grandmother” instead of a bottle of Lithium? In the next success story, I will tell you about the case of a boy named Milo, who at age nine was already making threats against his teachers and classmates. He and I both learned through unrelenting hard work that the path to recovery from uncontrollable anger and destructive thoughts is often a long one. I have altered some of the information to protect Milo and his family’s identity but the content of the story remains the same.

Milo

My brother is “insane in the membrane.”

—A twelve-year-old girl’s summation of her brother’s behavior when I asked her to describe him to me.

Milo was brought to my office by his mother, Cecilia, who had been warned by school officials that her son was in dire need of psychotherapy. He was disruptive in class and was constantly getting into verbal altercations. He had been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder and was on the medication, Ritalin. At our first meeting, Cecilia told me that Milo had already been expelled thirteen times in the prior year. The first thing I noticed about Milo was that he was a big boy for his age. I later learned that he used his size to his advantage to intimidate and threaten smaller students. He was a minority student and frequently used this as an excuse for why he was so agitated at school. “The only way to make it at my school is to be rich and white,” he told me on a number of occasions.

Perhaps there was some truth to this statement but Milo only made this remark when he was in trouble for fighting or stealing and needed an excuse for his behavior. He felt other kids picked on him and made fun of how he looked. Unfortunately, Milo gave as good as he got; he often sought out younger or smaller kids to pick on. He even hit one kid over the head with a chair when no one was looking and threatened to do it again if the child told anyone. At one point, he became so angry at school that he started stalking the principal and told me that he planned to kill him. I called the principal, Mr. Black, to warn him about Milo's threat and was met with an amused laugh on the other end of the line. I could tell as I described Milo's anger and emotional instability that the principal was not taking the threat seriously. "How could a ten-year-old boy possibly do anything to me?" he asked. I told him I was just doing my duty as a psychologist by warning him of the potential danger. "Thanks a lot," he said, but it was obvious from his tone of voice that the only alarm he was feeling was over having an overly-dramatic therapist call him and interrupt his day. As I hung up the phone, I had a feeling that I would be hearing from Mr. Black again.

Sure enough, the following year, after the rash of school killings in 1997 became headline news, Mr. Black called me up to say that he was taking Milo's behavior more seriously. "That kid is always following me and seems paranoid. One day, I caught him looking over my shoulder while I was on my computer. He snuck up on me, I didn't even know he was there." I assured Mr. Black that I was working closely with Milo in our sessions and would be glad to come out to the school to observe him. He seemed relieved and we left it that I would come out the following week to watch Milo in action in his classroom. I often go out to observe the kids I see for therapy at their schools. Often kids are friendly and cooperative in my office, usually because there is little pressure on them and they are the center of attention. Add a cold drink and some games to play with and it becomes clear that the office is not the best place to see a child's true behavior. What I saw in

Milo's classroom did not come as a surprise. Milo had trouble sitting in a reading group and would constantly kick the boy next to him. Finally, he had created such a distraction to the other students that the teacher's aide sent him to the back of the room to play on the computer. Then, of course, he was fine. Milo loved the computer (many kids with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder love the rapid movement of computer games). This method of rewarding Milo for his misbehavior was only encouraging him to act out as much as possible. I pointed this out to the staff and, for a while, Milo's behavior improved when he knew he would be rewarded with computer time only for good behavior. However, this improvement was short-lived and before long, Milo was back to his old ways, kicking other kids and losing his temper. At times he would steal from others as a way of getting back at them. Once, he stole money from the principal's office. When I asked him why he did it, he just shrugged. Mainly, he felt angry with one of his teachers for being a "whiny woman who tried to tell me what to do." Milo was also constantly getting in trouble because of a girl in his class who would call him names and he would turn red and shake until he blew up. We did some role-playing in our sessions where I would act out ways deal with this girl. He would roar with laughter at my imitations of a tough black girl but he finally got the message—that losing his cool only made things worse. He wrote down a list of things he could do when the girl would try to get him in trouble. These included counting to twenty to calm himself, stopping to think about what he was doing and not looking at her to avoid getting angrier. We also worked on changing his distorted thinking patterns which included thinking others were always making fun of him, that he was entitled to special treatment from the school staff and that the world was a hostile place. With another year of therapy, Milo quit getting upset often and stopped stealing. He became addicted to computers and bragged about becoming a computer hacker. The computer took up so much of this time that he rarely picked on anyone at school. He told me that his computer skills set him apart; he was no

longer seen as “stupid,” but was thought to be important because of his computer knowledge. His angry outbursts became less frequent over time. There were still times I was called in by the school to attend a meeting about Milo’s behavioral problems but not as often. At one point, a teacher in one of the meetings stated that she was concerned that Milo was potentially becoming a computer hacker. At that moment, my heart swelled with pride; little did the school staff know that becoming a computer hacker was a step in the right direction for Milo—at least he wasn’t beating other kids up anymore or stalking anyone. He was making progress. After the meeting, his mother and I congratulated ourselves on a job well done.

As I pointed out in the first chapter, our job as authority figures is not necessarily to turn these kids into saints, or even admirable citizens, it is to stop them from harming other people or themselves. In my work, I consider treatment a success if the client can function reasonably well in society without lashing out physically and ending up in jail or worse. One day, a woman called my office to say she had read an article I had written and decided to call to ask for advice about what to do with her nephew. She stated that he was now eighteen years old and had been violent and angry all of his life. As a child, he banged his head against the wall, screamed and bit other children and adults. As he got older he punched holes in walls, threw objects and hit his siblings. His parents and aunt had done everything possible to intervene on this boy’s behalf. They took him to a therapist, went to school meetings and used behavioral management techniques to reduce his bad behavior. The parents were wringing their hands feeling like miserable failures because the young man had not finished school and was currently out of work. I asked if the teen had ever been in jail to which the woman replied “no, he is calmer now and not as violent, he’s just a deadbeat.” I told her that instead of looking at all this boy had not accomplished, she should look at what he had done. He started out in life with a violent disposition and with the help of his loving parents and aunt, managed to stay out of jail and had never seriously harmed anyone. The

parents should be beaming with joy. The woman laughed and said, “You know, I never thought about it like that. But I guess he’s a success depending on how you look at it.”

More Success Stories

Of course, there are violent or potentially violent kids who grow up to do better than just staying out of jail. Many of these teens and adults wrote me or e-mailed to tell me about the difficulties they encountered as kids and how they learned to cope, each in their own way. I have chosen some of my favorite success stories from the letters and e-mails from around the country that best describe the transition from feelings of anger and despair to those of hope. Following are some of their letters which I have edited to highlight the most salient parts of their stories. The first letter is from a thirty-six-year old man:

Dear Dr. Smith:

When I was a child, I was relentlessly teased and harassed—even by a couple of teachers and the administrative office. I was an absolute outcast. My intelligence forbade me to deal with the kind of trifles that those around me did, and made the stupidities of the school painfully obvious. In one event, my advanced placement English teacher in my senior year required us to memorize the school alma mater for a grade. I took my concerns over this to her, after class, with no one else in the room. I felt I had been rejected by the school, why should I support it? Her response was to berate me, and to go to the counselor’s office and withdraw her recommendation for my scholarship. She sent the scholarship committee a letter urging them not to give me the scholarship. I lost a \$1500.00 a year scholarship because of that. The principal supported her actions. I plotted the rest of the year, and worked on a project to unleash on the last day of

classes. No, it wasn't a gun; but it was violence in its own way. My intelligence would not allow me to do something that would hurt others physically, but I was more than happy to abuse them mentally. I wrote a 32 page pamphlet lampooning the various authority figures and students who had abused me and distributed over 50 copies... I'm still semi-permanently depressed. It's hard to say how much of this is due to the school environment, and how much to other factors; but I have to believe that the former is a huge ingredient. To this day, I hate and shun children. I had a vasectomy when I was 27 to ensure that I never would be forced to deal with them. I am 36 now and a successful computer scientist, but my hands still shake with rage as I write much of this....

The next letter is from a woman in her thirties who hid under stairwell at school to attack some girls who were abusing her. Here is her story:

Dear Dr. Smith:

My name is Donna and I was considered a nerd, cooties carrier and those types of things that stay with you throughout my years at school. I can remember an incident when I was in middle school with these two girls, of course they were in the "In Crowd." At the time, I felt pushed to my limits and waited for these two girls under a stairwell with all the lights off but a few and I sat and waited. I had no weapon except for my hands and I was planning on hurting them severely. I HAD HAD ENOUGH!!! It was pure luck or God's great way of helping these girls that they did not come down that hall, a hall they used everyday. I honestly can't say what stopped me (from hurting the girls), all I can remember is that I was under the stairwell in the school hall and it seemed like I blacked out. I was very shy and quiet but I can remember thinking the

night before that it's got to stop! I do think a normal kid can be pushed to such violence but probably if it had been going on for a long time. I do think it is more likely to happen to a child who is raised in an abusive environment, but isn't being treated the way kids treat others in school abusive? Everyone has a certain amount of what they can take and if they can't stop these kids, then kids get desperate and start thinking of other ways that are not so good to stop them. I hated going to school. I feared going to college because I thought I would be treated the same way, but luckily I wasn't.

The next letter is from a fourteen-year-old girl who lost her best friend and her sense of self along with her. Luckily, she learned before it was too late that from loss, one can grow and become stronger and more resilient.

Dear Dr. Smith:

I am a 14 year old 8th grader. Last year, I had nothing but problems going on. I didn't do good at school and I had problems outside of school. I was going out with this guy that I thought I loved for almost five months. He was the one I always talked to about my friends and he kept me happy most of the time. Then he broke up with me and I had no one to turn to but one person... my closest friend in my whole life. She knew EVERYTHING about me. Even things that my family didn't know. She wasn't just my friend, she was my sister, my mother. She gave me friendly advice about things that I needed help on. She was my sister and made sure I didn't get hurt in any way and she was my mother telling me what was right and what was wrong in everything that I did. But just recently she died. It was a bad scene for me! !! In class one day she grabbed my arm really tight and told me she couldn't breathe. I told her to take long deep breaths

and sit up straight but it seemed like no air was going through. They called the ambulance and while we were waiting, I was screaming and crying and yelling at her to wake up. She made it to the hospital. I went to her room and she was finally awake. She just looked into my eyes and said, "Don't let me die like this, not in the hospital. It's not how I want to die, it's not my time." A couple of days later, I got a call from her mom, "She's not with us anymore...." I tried as hard as I could not to cry but then I realized it's ok to cry. (She had a new boyfriend at the time but felt uneasy about trusting anyone). I still felt like I didn't have anyone. I got really physical with myself as well as others. I got real life threatening. I started to think that life sucks until my new boyfriend told me that the only reason why life sucks is because I'm making it. I am very grateful to my boyfriend because if I wasn't with him at the time I probably would have went with her. But luckily I did and still do have him with me. Now it's hard to open up to anyone else, including my family. But I do know that if I don't open up to somebody soon,, then I will have it bottled up and possibly do something stupid and that's why I run to my boyfriend when I need someone. And now, I'm helping a lot of other people to understand the reason why they think the way they think. I am more happy now and just because bad things happen doesn't mean it's time to leave the world or take others out as well. I live up to a saying, "Life is a game, the question is –Are you willing to play? Because if you don't play the game, the game will play you."

The next story is from a thirty-year-old man who barely made it through being bullied and ostracized since the sixth grade without harming anyone. His ability to use the process of rational thought to turn a bad situation into a tolerable one

shows that it is possible to use anger constructively to live a productive life.

Dear Dr. Smith:

I was bullied and ostracized , starting in earnest in the sixth grade. Everyday in junior high was like something out of a nightmare, and even though things improved once I got to high school, they were still very unpleasant. My memories of these years are still enough to send me into a blind rage. Anyone would be, to some extent, damaged after the experience of being bullied like that. It's not so bad that the teachers and administrators turn a blind eye but the physical education teachers in large part seem to subtly encourage the bullying; the bullies are almost always, of course, the jocks. When there was intervention of a sort in junior high, my idiot principal and incompetent school social worker were always telling me it was my fault. In school, I wasn't about to go on a rampage and kill people, I had way too much to lose. But I can say with absolute certainty that every hour of every school day for seven years I fantasized about doing it myself and also about someone coming in the school out of the blue and doing it, it really didn't matter. Shortly before graduation a friend and I got out our newly acquired senior yearbooks and went through a mental exercise: if we could do so, with absolute certainty that we would suffer no repercussions whatsoever, who in our graduating class would we kill? The answer? Over 120 out of a graduating class of 373. This friend is also an intelligent, capable, and in adult life, a successful, person; he is now a physician. If we, two intelligent teenagers with bright futures, were inspired to go through that exercise—and if today, 12 years after graduation, I can still be driven to rage thinking about the distant past, my god, what are the effects on others less capable of deal-

ing with such an experience? I don't wonder at how many incidents like this there are, but how few. If I had wanted to get a gun, I have little doubt I could have, but there was never any serious thought on our part to actually do any such thing. A very important part of this exercise was the very big disclaimer "if we knew with absolute certainty that we could, without suffering and repercussion" kill any number of our classmates, who would it be? I suppose it allowed us to be totally uninhibited in making our choices. Additionally, this exercise was days before graduation, so this was really just venting to celebrate being in "the light at the end of the tunnel" mode. Of course, fantasies of violence against my tormentors were almost hourly fare in my mind for years prior to this, but I don't think I ever thought seriously about doing anything about it, and if I did, the thought may have lasted all of thirty seconds: of course, the opposite came to mind periodically, but rarely seriously. Being very goal-oriented at a young age is, I think, the best defense against bullying. Also, I think the answer, from my perspective, is for teachers and administrators to exercise some moral leadership and finally start to do something about bullying and ostracism and for schools to get competent social workers (the one I dealt with in junior high was terrible), to train teachers to recognize the signs of disturbance in their students, and frankly, to de-emphasize sports and, ideally, to make physical education class optional, or at least to separate students based on their athletic ability, like they are (in good schools, at least) based on their abilities in Math and English. Physical education teachers share a huge level of responsibility for creating bullies, because I saw bullying of not only myself but others start in PE classes in response to dismal athletic performances, then spread like a virus, and the PE teachers, with a few exceptions, did little if anything to stop it, and fre-

quently subtly encouraged it. My life improved immeasurably in college. I worked as a NASA contractor for seven years and now work as a computer system administrator. I am now 30 years old, married with a dog (I hope he is talking about a real dog and not his wife) 20 hamsters, and 200 orchids. In short, after leaving high school, life has been very, very good to me.

I have received numerous other letters from outcasts and former outcasts across the country that describe their horrendous experiences in school and in life, in general and how they overcame their obstacles. One commonality I have noticed in many of the stories I have read or listened to from my patients is that once they made it to college, their life improved in a variety of ways. I found this to be true in many of the surveys I received from older teens who were eighteen or nineteen and in college. Most of them acknowledged liking school at that point or found it at least "ok." What is different about freshman year at college (a time when most kids admit to liking school) as compared to the senior year of high school when many kids feel trapped and unhappy at school? Do kids suddenly become more mature the summer after they turn eighteen than they were a few months earlier as seniors in high school? While increased maturity is certainly a possibility, it is also just as likely that one can decide whether or not to go to college and there is also (hopefully) more emphasis on academics. Teens are also treated more like adults once they are in college. Success in college means making good grades and being smart while these same traits make one an oddball in high school. Conformity is the name of the game in high school whereas in college, even oddballs can usually find a group of peers who can tolerate those differences. Perhaps we should model high schools and junior highs after colleges by viewing intelligence as an asset and not a liability. School choice might also help kids who are unhappy at school to alleviate the feeling (and reality) that they are trapped. Many times, what sends

kids over the edge is the thought that their feelings of suffering will never end. Just the knowledge that there is another place to go that might not be as miserable may make a child feel some control over their life. This is what happened to my friend, Catherine. At fifteen, she was tortured endlessly at the high school she was zoned to attend. Her school life was miserable; every time she got on the school bus, kids would call her “stinkweed” because she was overweight and they knew it bothered her. The rest of the time, she was ignored. At sixteen, she finally had her father take her down to the school board and demanded that she be allowed to attend another nearby school. This other school was known to be less affluent and the kids there were less snobby. The school authorities told my friend that she was zoned to go to the high school she currently attended and they would not let her change schools. She looked at them and in her most authoritative voice stated, “Well, then I will not go back to school” In those days, you could quit school at sixteen. The school board gave in, rather than have her drop out of school. It was the best decision my friend could have made in her young life. At her new school, she started making friends with other teens who were more interested in poetry and English than they were in what car she drove. Now Catherine is a successful English and writing professor who still believes that getting out of an atmosphere of hate and ridicule changed her life for the better. In addition to school choice, it might be time for our society to reconsider mandatory education for teens over the age of fourteen or fifteen. There are many kids whom school does not prepare for their future career. Vocational schools might fulfill the needs of some students for whom regular school is not the answer. Many politicians and parents mistakenly believe that *all* children need to be educated until they are eighteen and able to make their own decisions. But are these children really getting an education? Kids who cannot learn or do not want to learn at school are not getting an education—they are getting state-paid baby sitting. If they are chronic troublemakers, they are also making it difficult or impossible for other kids to get their education. Those

kids who hate school and want to work could be given the option of doing so and returning later to get a GED. Our society needs to come up with more options for teens who do not want to go to school or cannot attend school because of behavioral problems—not have schools act as a giant prison so that all teens will be kept off the streets.

Notes

1. Janofsky, Michael, “Columbine Student Killers’ Tapes Filled With Rage,” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, December 14, 1999.

