


The Doubting Disease

The Salt Lake Tribune has a nice piece in the Dec. 11 issue looking at  scrupulosity, a psychological disorder that drives sufferers to worry obsessively about sin. Sometimes called the ‘doubting disease,’ the condition plagues many religious-minded people of all denominations.

A snip...

Though it has been described for centuries in Catholic literature and afflicted saints such as Ignatius of Loyola, Alphonsus Liguori and Catherine of Siena, as well as reformer Martin Luther, scrupulosity has been recognized in the field of psychology only in recent decades.

A series of books, beginning with The Doubting Disease: Help for Scrupulosity and Religious Compulsions in the mid-1990s, helped raise awareness.

Scrupulosity is not in itself a diagnosis, but falls within the OCD family of anxiety disorders, explains Jonathan S. Abramowitz, a clinical psychologist and researcher in the field at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Unlike the normal person who can reject intrusive thoughts — and everyone has them — people with OCD get tied in knots by their mistaken ways of thinking and behaving, Abramowitz says. They cannot handle ambiguity, which makes it hard for one who is scrupulous to remain a person of faith.

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According to the International OCD Foundation, up to 3 million U.S. adults and about 500,000 children suffer from OCD. Of those, 5 percent to 30 percent have scrupulosity, according to one estimate.

Its sources are biological and likely environmental, but Abramowitz believes OCD manifests itself as scrupulosity mostly in those who care a lot about their faith, whether that is Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism. Conversely, it makes it difficult for the faithful to remain faithful.

A Catholic woman may confess to her priest constantly about intrusive obscene thoughts while gazing on a crucifix, a “sin” she fears is unforgivable, while an Orthodox Jew might worry obsessively that he didn’t keep his milk separate from his meat in accord with kosher law.

“Folks with scrupulosity have a pretty harsh view of God. They see him as looking down with a magnifying glass, waiting for people to screw up so he can blast them with lightning,” Abramowitz says. “That runs counter to what most religions teach.”

There’s much more here.