

‘Talking About My OCD Has Helped So Much’

Debbie Thomson has experienced OCD for most of her life but with the help of her friend she’s able to be open about her mental-health problem

Debbie’s story

Debbie Thomson, 32, is studying for a degree in psychology and works part-time as a health trainer. She was diagnosed with OCD when she was 16.

‘My symptoms of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) started when I was six. I remember being terrified our house was going to catch fire, no matter how much my parents tried to calm me down. I became so obsessed I was unable to sleep at night.

‘It then developed into an obsession with cleanliness. I began washing my hands until they were red raw and, not wanting to touch the handles, I’d use my elbows to open doors. I used to keep moving furniture around in my

bedroom until it felt “right”. I was scared that, if I didn’t, something bad would happen to me or to someone I loved. When I was eight, my mother was hospitalised with breast cancer, so then I became terrified that if I didn’t carry out my rituals, Mum would die.

‘I’d been referred to a school nurse when I was about eight, but it wasn’t until I was 16 that my OCD was finally diagnosed. I started seeing a psychiatric

nurse and I realised I had a mental-health problem. It was the first I’d heard of OCD and I’d kept it hidden for so long, I knew it would take time for me to understand it. My parents hoped it would go away and tended not to talk about it. We never realised that one in four people go through a mental-health problem in any given year.

‘Living with OCD was a daily battle and, from the age of 21, I started seeing a psychotherapist. My lowest point came

“I became terrified that if I didn’t carry out my rituals, Mum would die”

after the birth of my daughter Mina. My problem had always been about control, and now I had this baby making a mess everywhere. I began cleaning the house from morning until night, barely going out, bathing Mina two or three times a day.

‘A deep depression sunk in and by the time Mina was six months old, I felt suicidal. One day I rang my husband at work and told him, “I can’t cope. I want to go to hospital.” But later that day, I sat looking at Mina in her cot and thought, “If I’m not here, who’s going to look after my daughter?” I promised myself I would have to get better. It wasn’t easy but, with a lot of intense therapy, I started to feel better. I’ve accepted I will never recover, but I have



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‘I never would have guessed Debbie had a mental health problem’

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gradually learned how to live with OCD.

‘I decided to go to university and it was there I met Vicky, who was on the same course. I found I could really open up to her about my OCD. For the first time, I began to talk about how it made me feel. After all these years, it was liberating. She was completely non-judgemental. In the past, I’d had negative reactions from other people when I’d mentioned my cleaning obsession. No one seemed to understand – until now.

‘After I separated from my husband last year, Vicky and I decided to become housemates. If I’m having a down day, she’ll always notice. I don’t always want to talk about my OCD, but it’s reassuring to know she’s there. I like the fact she’s honest with me, too. Once, when I was upset about a workman using our sponge to wipe the walls, she said, “But

remember, not everyone has rules like you do.” She helps me to be rational and talking about my mental-health problem has strengthened our friendship.

‘My cleaning is more “normal” now but, if there’s any contamination in the house, such as dog muck on a shoe, I’ll go into a cleaning frenzy.

‘In the past few years I’ve also become obsessed with my appearance, trying to be “perfect”, but keeping busy and focusing on positive things, like my course, helps to distract me. I’ve set up a local self-help support group called OCD Support ([facebook.com/ocdsupport](https://www.facebook.com/ocdsupport)) and last year I finally decided to be open with everyone about my OCD. It will always be part of me, but I’m learning to manage it. I know who I am now and what I want from life.’

Vicky’s story

Vicky Norris, 25, met Debbie when they were on the same course at university. Debbie confided in her about her OCD six months after they’d met.

‘When I first met Debbie I just thought what a lovely person she was. She was always smiling and laughing. I never would have guessed she was struggling with a mental-health problem. I can barely remember when she first told me, which shows it wasn’t a big deal.

‘I didn’t know much about OCD, but to me it was just the same as having any other health issue. If a friend told you they had cancer, you wouldn’t turn your back on them. I just thought she was brave and admired the fact she’d set up a support group to help others with OCD. I really appreciated the fact she felt able to confide in me.

‘Before we moved in together, Debbie told me she was concerned that her OCD might be stressful for me, but it’s worked out fine, as I knew what to expect. Ours is just a normal family home – it’s not clinically clean, but Debbie has an issue with the idea of germs being spread via people’s shoes. She explained that in her old house she would always vacuum the doormat last, then wipe the Hoover with an anti-bacterial wipe. After we moved in I started to do the same, as I didn’t want to upset her, but she said, “You can just leave it, I feel OK today...” I didn’t question it or make a big deal of it, which seemed the best approach.

‘I’ve been able to help her rationalise her thoughts. For instance, once I came downstairs to find her very upset, cleaning her jacket with anti-bacterial wipes, because she’d stepped in dog muck. She asked me, “I don’t need to have a shower do I?” and I reassured her she didn’t and that it wouldn’t harm her. As a friend, although it might not be an issue for you, you have to understand it could be a massive deal to someone else. Never dismiss their thoughts, but instead try to appreciate why they might think like they do.

‘I’ve always said if there’s anything you want to talk about, I’m here, but I never press or judge Debbie. Like any relationship the friendship works both ways. She’s always there for me whenever I need to talk too.’

LET’S TALK

Want to help a friend affected by a mental-health problem? Here’s how to get the conversation started...

■ **TAKE THE LEAD** If you know someone’s been unwell, don’t be afraid to ask how they are. They may or may not want to talk about it, but letting them know they don’t have to avoid the issue with you is important.

■ **ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP** People will want support in different ways.

■ **AVOID CLICHES** Saying ‘Cheer up’ or ‘I’m sure it’ll pass’ isn’t helpful, but just listening to them and being open-minded and non-judgemental is.

■ **DON’T JUST TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH** Chat about everyday things as well. Having a mental health problem is just one part of your friend.

■ **DON’T SKIRT THE ISSUE** If someone tries to talk to you, don’t brush it off because opening up can be a hard step for them to take. Acknowledge their problem and remind them you’re there for them.

■ **GIVE THEM TIME** Some people prefer a text or email, rather than talking on the phone or face-to-face. It’s just important for them to know you’ll be there when they’re ready to get in touch. Remind them you care.

it’s time to talk. it’s time to change

let’s end mental health discrimination

Time to Change is England’s most ambitious programme to end the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental-health problems. Run by the charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, it’s funded by the Department of Health, as well as Comic Relief. Start your conversation today at **[time-to-change.org.uk](https://www.time-to-change.org.uk)** or tweet with the hashtag **#timetotalk**