

## Paul's religious and sexual thoughts

Before we describe Paul, we should warn you that you might find his story more upsetting than the others in this chapter, because his obsessions are of a sexual and religious nature. We do not apologize for including Paul's story, because such symptoms are typical of OCD so we cannot avoid dealing with such problems.

Paul had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church. He did not have a particularly strong personal faith, but he had respect for his priest and religion. He became increasingly troubled by the idea that he would blurt out obscenities against Christ or God. When sitting in church listening to a sermon he would experience sacrilegious thoughts and an urge to stand up and shout an obscenity. He tried very hard to push the urge away each time it arose and to think of something 'nice'. He would say 'Sorry God', and try to neutralize the thought by undoing it with a prayer that he repeated twelve times. He found that he could not concentrate on the sermon properly. He became increasingly concerned that he would be sent to hell for eternity as a sinner and that his family would be destroyed by the devil's disciples. Each Sunday before he arrived at church he would decide that this time he would make sure he kept his mind clear of any blasphemous thoughts. However, he continued to experience the urge, and began to dread going to church. He began to avoid reading the Bible or having any contact with his priest. Paul prayed every night until he felt comfortable, and tried to apologize to God and seek forgiveness. He now began to think of a revolting penance to punish himself, by asking himself what was the worst thing he could think of? However, this developed into a whole new intrusive thought.

When there were stories in the media about a famous pop star being accused of paedophile activity, Paul started to experience an intrusive image of having oral sex with one or both of his daughters. These images were often triggered by seeing his children or by looking at certain pictures. He was very frightened because he thought on some occasions he had a tingling sensation in his penis. He tried to challenge the thoughts logically and reassure himself. Alternatively, he tried to think of something else or distract himself by going for a run. He believed that morally he should not have such thoughts. He ruminated on why he had them and why they didn't just stop. He generally believed he would not act upon the thoughts, but when they were strong he avoided being near his daughters. He would check to see if he was still attracted to his wife or other women, but because he was feeling down and his libido was reduced, this strengthened his doubts that he was attracted only to his daughters. He now had little doubt in his head that he liked what he saw in the image. Finally he thought he could no longer go to church because of the fear of having the intrusive thoughts of his daughters in church.

## Paul's alternative theory

There are two competing theories for Paul's problems:

- **Theory A:** Paul was sick and evil, a paedophile and blasphemer. The implications of this theory (which Paul had been following for some time) were that he had to try very hard to control his impulses.
- **Theory B:** Paul was a person who cared a great deal for his church and his daughters, but was very worried about harming his daughters. Trying too hard to control his intrusive thoughts maintained them.

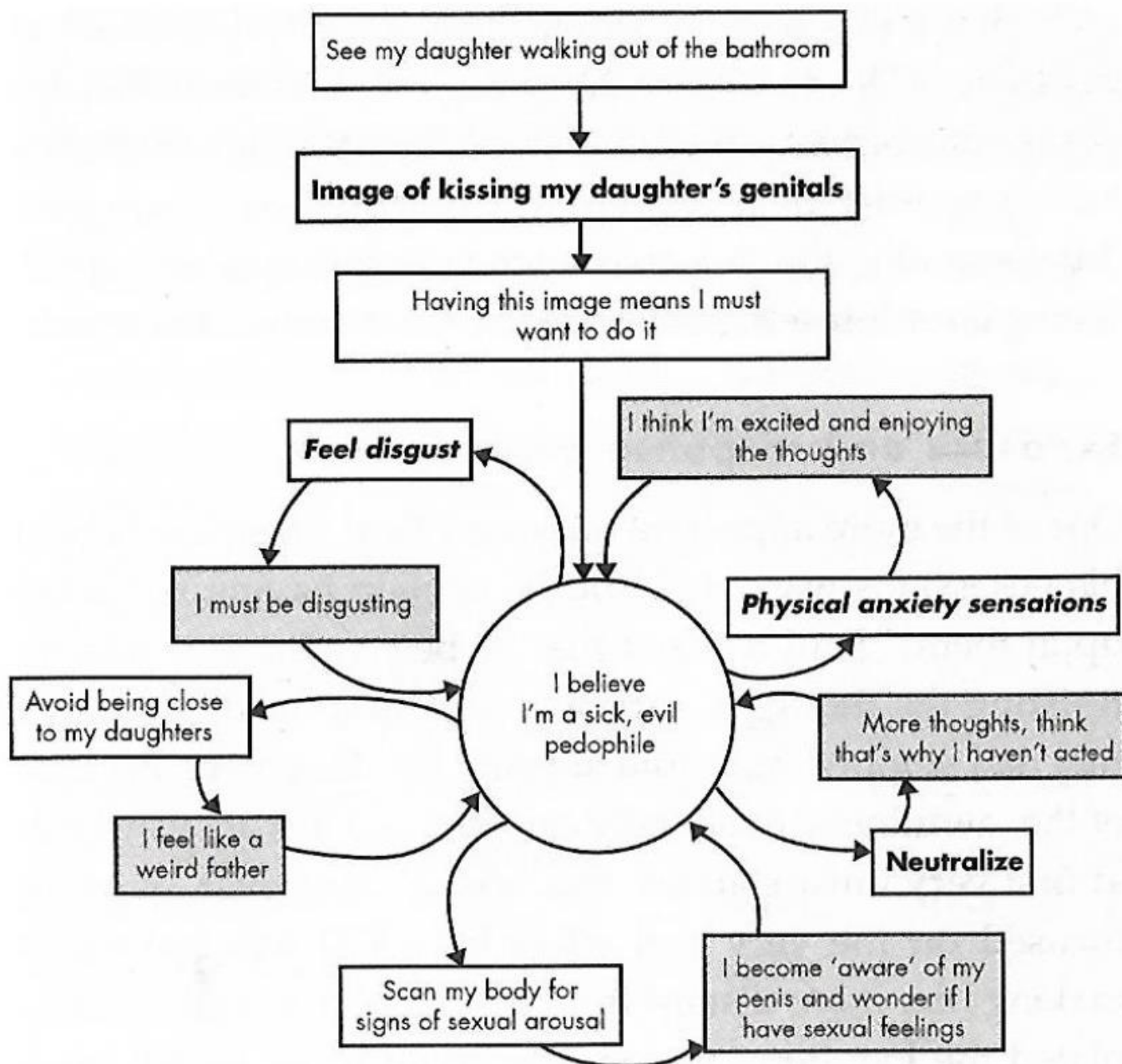


Figure 4.7 Paul's 'vicious flower' diagram

## **How Paul tested the effect of resisting intrusive thoughts**

Paul used a Behavioral Experiment to see for himself the effect of resisting his intrusive thoughts. He spent a day resisting his thoughts of abusing his daughters, and recorded the frequency, intensity, and duration of the thoughts. He then spent a second day trying harder, as hard as he could, not to have any thoughts of abusing his daughters and again recorded their frequency, intensity and duration. Then he returned to his usual amount of resistance. The results of the experiment showed that his obsessions were indeed worse on the day he tried even harder to resist them. Although he had previously accepted 'intellectually' that his resistance thoughts was unhelpful, seeing it for himself really helped Paul to reduce his rituals

## **Exposure and response prevention**

One of the more important questions Paul considered about his obsessions was 'How did he explain having not acted upon them?' Paul realized that he believed that it was his resisting the thoughts, carrying out rituals, and avoidance that had stopped him from abusing his daughters. Because of the 'awfulness' of actually carrying out this act, Paul was at first very unsure about 'risk-taking'. However, when he focused on the very real effect his OCD was having in making him more distant from his daughters, and contemplated the long-term impact this could have, he felt more able to try facing his fears.

Paul developed the exposure and response prevention hierarchy shown in Table 4.3 (Next page) for his fear of thoughts about abusing his daughters.

Once Paul gained confidence that he could safely allow his intrusive thoughts about abusing his daughters to come and go, he felt much more confident about his blasphemous thoughts and impulses. He did deliberate exposure and response prevention in church and while reading the Bible, 'allowing' the impulse to blurt out blasphemous obscenities to happen, without apologizing to God or repeatedly praying.

**TABLE 4.3: Paul's hierarchy of triggers and program of exposure**

<i>Exposure and response prevention goals (object, word, place, person, situation, substance)</i>	<i>Estimated anxiety or discomfort (0–100)</i>	<i>Actual anxiety at end (0–100)</i>
Letting the girls get into bed with me in the morning	95	
Giving the girls a bath without neutralizing my thoughts	95	
Sitting on the girls' bed to read them a bedtime story	80	
Helping the girls to get dressed	75	
Letting the girls sit on my lap in front of the TV	70	
Giving the girls a hug	65	

### **Re-evaluating faulty beliefs**

At the heart of Paul's OCD was the extent to which he regarded his thoughts and images as being important. As he became more successful in overcoming his OCD, Paul began to see that intention and action were much more important than the thoughts and images that might cross his mind. He concluded that although he certainly would prefer not to have blasphemous or inappropriate sexual thoughts cross his mind, there was no reason why he must not have them, since he was only human. Anyway, trying to resist such thoughts had clearly led him to have more of them, and the fact that he had tried so hard to resist them in the past was proof of what a gentle and caring person he was.

Adapted from *Overcoming Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Overcoming Books): A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* by David Veale; Rob Willson | 2009 (1<sup>st</sup> edition). There is now a second edition (2021)